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Humanitarian Leader

**Building stronger field teams for better outcomes:
the Field Team Impact Kit**

KATHRYN HARRIES



THE HUMANITARIAN LEADER:

Building stronger field teams for better outcomes: the Field Team Impact Kit

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Author Details

Kathryn Harries

Kathryn Harries has over two decades of experience working in, with and leading or coordinating technical field teams in humanitarian and development contexts. She has recently developed a guide to support and empower these teams, which is available at www.teamimpactkit.com.

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Editorial Office

The Centre For Humanitarian Leadership
Deakin University
221 Burwood Highway
Burwood 3125 VIC
Australia

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Abstract

There is inadequate support for leadership, management and learning within technical field teams in humanitarian organisations, and this hinders timely, effective humanitarian action. This paper describes the journey to develop the Field Team Impact Kit (FieldTiK), an approach that provides practical guidance and tools, rather than just soft skills, to improve field team performance. It addresses the recognised challenges: that support for team leaders is scarce, access to relevant resources is often poor, team knowledge is incompletely retained, and adapting and continually improving can be difficult. Sector experts overwhelmingly agreed that use of the FieldTiK would fill a significant gap, particularly for local non-governmental organisations, enabling improved outcomes, including in accountability, locally led response, quality, adaptability, safeguarding and team well-being.

Leadership relevance

Humanitarian organisations consist of many semi-autonomous teams, often led by people with little formal leadership or management experience. The Field Team Impact Kit (FieldTiK) provides in situ, step-by-step practical guidance for improved team performance—strengthening outcomes as well as team leadership, management, knowledge, and learning. The approach encompasses the iterative Plan-Do-Check-Act continuous improvement cycle, supports teams to retain knowledge between projects and emergencies, and encourages a demand-led, rather than supply-driven, flow of knowledge to field experts operationalising an organisation’s vision. The FieldTiK fills a key leadership gap in the system and helps to enhance trust and accountability, for more timely and effective humanitarian action. Please contact the author if you are interested in helping to progress, pilot and refine this initiative.

Ethics Statement

This project received ethics approval from Deakin University. All research participants explicitly granted consent for their comments to be published, on the understanding that their contribution would be anonymous—aliases are used—and generalised—their organisations can’t be identified. This allowed the participating sector experts to speak openly about the challenges they have experienced throughout their careers.

**This paper is based on a PhD research thesis entitled, *Improving Humanitarian Impact: Development of an Innovative Guide for Empowering Technical Field Teams* by Kathryn Harries.*

Introduction

There continues to be inadequate support for leadership, management and learning at field level in humanitarian organisations (Obrecht & Bourne, 2018; Ramalingam, 2008), reducing the effectiveness of interventions (Larson & Foropon, 2018). This is despite the understanding that:

Effective international action is in large part dependent on the ability of operational staff to manage and implement programmes and projects. Therefore, the operational level should be where much of the learning that is crucial to the success of international action takes place, and where critical improvements are made. (Ramalingam, 2008, p. 5)

This is a particularly acute problem for local actors and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which are even more excluded from learning and training opportunities (Tanner, 2016), impacting locally led action.

The research presented in this article focuses on providing a solution to this problem for technical field teams—that is, the staff working at the frontline in technical areas such as health, shelter, or water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) who are generally the organisational representatives closest to people affected by crisis.

ALNAP (2022) reports that more than 630,000 humanitarian staff were working in countries experiencing crises in 2020, more than double the number a decade earlier—and 90% were national workers. The growing number of frontline staff means there is a “need for greater investments in management and training to ensure quality and safeguarding standards” (ALNAP, 2022, p. 62). Humanitarian field teams are central to long-neglected sector-wide challenges, including ensuring staff have the requisite skills, incorporating feedback from crisis-affected people in program design, making programs more context-specific and improving adaptability, preventing abuse and exploitation, monitoring focused on outcomes rather than outputs, and insufficient localisation (ALNAP, 2018).

ALNAP (2022) reports that more than 630,000 humanitarian staff were working in countries experiencing crises in 2020, more than double the number a decade earlier—and 90% were national workers.

Technical field teams in humanitarian organisations operate with greater independence and less training than teams in other emergency services. Government and defence organisations follow incident management systems, such as the Australasian Inter-service Incident

Management System (AFAC, 2017), which includes comprehensive training, a single incident controller, a top-down plan, clear roles and responsibilities (including for intelligence and planning), and common terminology (Kalloniatis et al., 2020).

In contrast, field teams in humanitarian organisations operate with much weaker command and control systems (Knox-Clarke, 2017); “NGO staff and volunteers are used to significant autonomy, objectives that are long-term and often broad, consensus model decision making, and a strong focus on the needs of communities and individuals, particularly the most vulnerable and/or marginalised” (Harris, 2016, p. 21). In addition, humanitarian field teams must operate with accountability to both affected people and donors; typically, with unpredictable and inadequate levels of funding and other support (Borton, 2016). They work independently, though recognising government has primary responsibility; paying attention to cross-cutting factors such as localisation, safeguarding, diversity and inclusion; and often in dangerous environments, remote locations, with variable access to telecommunications. The devolved decision making (Bowers & Cherne, 2015; Clarke & Ramalingam, 2008) means they operate semi-autonomously, and allows for more responsive, flexible and dynamic humanitarian planning and action (Bowers & Cherne, 2015).

The need to empower humanitarian field teams is recognised in the sector. ALNAP, the global network for learning about and improving humanitarian action, recognised that supporting “field staff and partners to anticipate change and adapt their operations and programming based on new learning” will “deliver more relevant, appropriate and effective responses for millions of people affected by crisis each year” (Obrecht, 2019, p. 112). Another ALNAP report states that “effective and timely changes are harder to achieve when the knowledge of staff who are closest to communities is not maximised and respected within an organisation” (Doherty & Sundberg, 2022, p. iii). Moreover, to improve the flexibility of response, “humanitarian agencies need to engage seriously in rethinking their systems and practices to give greater decision-making power to their field teams, local partners and crisis-affected communities” and “focus on the realities that front-line staff are facing” (Obrecht, 2019, p. 12). Similarly, the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS Alliance et al., 2015, p. 31) states:

an effective response is not simply about ensuring that skilled staff are present – it will also depend on the way that individuals are managed. Research from emergency contexts shows that effective management, frameworks and procedures are as important as, if not more important than, the skills of personnel in ensuring an effective response.

The need for systematic, in situ guidance in humanitarian response has only increased since the beginning of the

COVID-19 pandemic and the greater use of remote management it engendered (HAG & CARE International, 2020).

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Humanitarian field teams are not alone in operating in an environment of devolved decision making (although they are certainly at the extreme end of the spectrum). For example, Padaki (2007) asserted that new staff in development organisations are often in roles that “require extraordinary levels of analytical, managerial, and relational skills, for which they have neither the training nor life experience” (p. 72). As a result, many field teams develop internal systems and guidance that “recreate almost the same thing many times in different functions and countries” (Parris, 2013, p. 462). Such duplication and lack of knowledge management represents a considerable waste of time and other resources that could be better directed towards maximising the effectiveness of humanitarian response.

Challenges facing field teams

A literature review identified four main problems facing technical field teams in humanitarian organisations. These are explained below.

Inadequate support for team leaders

The leaders of technical field teams may steer their teams over multiple projects spanning years, yet they generally receive inadequate support. It has been reported that humanitarian field staff experience stress and angst that stem more from “organisational and managerial pressure, as well as ineffective managers” than “considerations of security or exposure to risk” (Olive et al., 2019, p. 29). ALNAP (2018) assessed “slightly less than half” (48%) of country-level organisational leaders as being “good” or “excellent” (p. 192). Typically, organisations focus on training a single “hero” leader at country level, and “have arguably failed ... to put the teams, structures and procedures in place to make leadership work” (Knox-Clarke, 2014, p. 65).

Leadership training opportunities are even harder to come by for team leaders of local actors and national NGOs. As Tanner (2016, p. 48) stated:

The sector does not generally invest heavily in building organisational capacity or government capacity at the local level. In particular, local actors and national NGOs

are often marginalised from the most sophisticated learning and training opportunities that address leadership, management and coordination.

Knox-Clarke (2013) found that effective standardised procedures were largely lacking in the humanitarian sector. To be effective, these procedures “should be based on local [country office] good practice and regularly updated to take account of new learning”, rather than the “cumbersome and inflexible ... detailed procedures imposed from others” such as headquarters (Knox-Clarke, 2014, pp. 44–45).

Access to relevant resources

Team members have difficulty accessing relevant resources to fill gaps in knowledge. Attempting to do so can be overwhelming, even in a development context (Grant et al., 2016), due to poor filtering mechanisms, inadequate internet access, and lack of time. Technical field staff often begin work with narrow technical expertise (e.g., a water supply specialist or a development WASH specialist may be recruited as an emergency WASH specialist), and need to learn rapidly on the job. This includes discovering how to operationalise global initiatives such as accountability, localisation, safeguarding, gender-sensitive and inclusive approaches. A Sustainable Sanitation Alliance study (Shaylor et al., 2018) found practitioners wanted “easily locatable consolidated credible information on various topics ... [and] practical project guidance documents” (p. 4). When teams have trouble accessing useful resources rapidly, they may resort to reinventing the wheel, reducing the efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability of their work.

Poor retention of knowledge within and between emergencies and projects

Team knowledge is lost due to slow recruitment and high staff turnover from short-term contracts (Obrecht & Bourne, 2018), and poor team and organisational knowledge systems (Beck et al., 2004). Doherty and Sundberg (2022, p. iii) stated:

The knowledge of individual frontline staff is often not shared regularly among peers or senior colleagues. This means that the experiences of implementing one project are not adequately used to improve the outcomes of other ongoing or future projects. (p. iii)

In an emergency context, this includes basics such as the ability to find the latest needs assessment, contact lists and preparedness plan, but also locally appropriate technical solutions and processes, national standards, and practical global resources. Learning within projects and to inform future projects, such as from lessons learned reports, has also been identified as an area of significant weakness in the humanitarian field, lacking clear assignment of responsibility (Warner, 2017).

Where it exists, knowledge management support, is generally the responsibility of a single staff member or department producing or collating a 'supply' of knowledge for individual team members to access. Harries (2017a) termed this "individual-led knowledge management," because it relies on a staff member proactively accessing the data, and proposed an alternative "demand-led" approach driven by a field team or the team leader, along with an initial framework (Harries, 2017b). A disadvantage of a dedicated knowledge management department or person is that "giving responsibility to one person absolve[s] others of concern over the management of knowledge" (Roberts, 2015, p. 14).

Inability to adapt to meet changing local needs

Field teams' ability to adapt and continually improve their response is hampered by various barriers. They have little time or support for reflection (Obrecht & Bourne, 2018; Ramalingam, 2008) to identify problems and self-correct. Monitoring data can bypass the team. ALNAP (Warner, 2017) found that "reporting to donors and to headquarters is still [considered] more important than using monitoring information 'on the ground'" (p. 17). Indicators often don't provide the information required to improve the quality or effectiveness of interventions (Obrecht & Bourne, 2018), and timely analysis and decision making are not prioritised (Obrecht & Bourne, 2018). Moreover, many "lessons learned" sessions are in fact mostly about "lessons identified" (Centre for Army Lessons Learned, 2011, p. 3), because they provide an input into a donor report rather than lead to action. These factors affect a team's ability to adapt to meet changing community needs or deal with unintended consequences, support a community's move from crisis back to normal development conditions, and continually improve practice within and between emergencies.

Sector expert reflections

Sector experts interviewed for the research believed that the less than optimal functioning of technical field teams was a significant problem—described as crucial, enormous and widespread. Interviewees raised the following issues:

- The humanitarian world operates in silos that come together to be operationalised at the field team level, yet no holistic tools support them to work together as a functional team that learns and improves in this environment.
- There is no standard systematic approach to leading field teams, which is a difficult task due to high staff turnover, uncertain funding, and the specialised knowledge of team members.
- Organisations have poor ability to build dynamic teams, and this affects the quality of their response.

- There is insufficient focus on staff well-being.
- Loss of knowledge affects the team, program and organisation.

They also considered that existing management and leadership training tends to be focused on the top level, doesn't go into enough detail, and is focused on individual skills and soft skills rather than practical ways to maximise the effectiveness of teams. Fareed (interviewee names are pseudonyms), from the Global North, explained that mid-level managers look for their own resources, so it's "very sort of hodgepodge." Bisa, also from the Global North, said "I've never been in a mission where improving the team's capacities was not a top priority issue. However, out of all of those, [on] very few [occasions] something was done," due to lack of an appropriate tools and time. She felt that no such guide existed because no one has responsibility for this area, so no one took the lead.

A way forward?

The literature review explored possible solutions to the problems being experienced by technical field teams in humanitarian organisations. None of the approaches reviewed offered a complete solution to the research problem. In summary:

- **Leadership** literature is predominately focused on individual top-down leaders, assumes field staff to be passive followers (DeRue, 2011; Zaccaro et al., 2009), and its theories miss the "how" of leadership (Kozlowski et al., 2009).
- **Academic management** literature is largely theoretical and disconnected from practice (Bell & Thorpe, 2013).
- **Practical management** literature predominately takes a project-based approach, regarding each project as a unique, temporary endeavour (Project Management Institute, 2017). It does not meet the challenges facing semi-autonomous field teams, particularly around retaining knowledge and enabling continual improvement between projects and emergencies. The alternative is a process-based approach, designed for continuously improving recurrent activity and, more specifically, a complex process-based approach (Harvey & Aubry, 2018), that does fit the current problem. Harvey and Aubry (2018) asserted that many interventions that are currently considered projects would benefit from improved learning and continual improvement if they were instead considered complex processes.
- The small body of **team management** literature is focused on top-level teams. The literature on team development interventions—actions taken to improve the performance of a team—is "piecemeal" (Shuffler et al., 2018, p. 688) and focuses on smaller interventions like

team task analysis and team composition rather than the holistic approach envisaged in this research.

- **Knowledge management** literature generally takes an organisation-wide or top-down approach (Visscher et al., 2006), so neglects the knowledge management occurring within field teams. It also does not include the subsequent use of knowledge to change practice, which generally fits within the field “learning organisation” (Roberts, 2015).

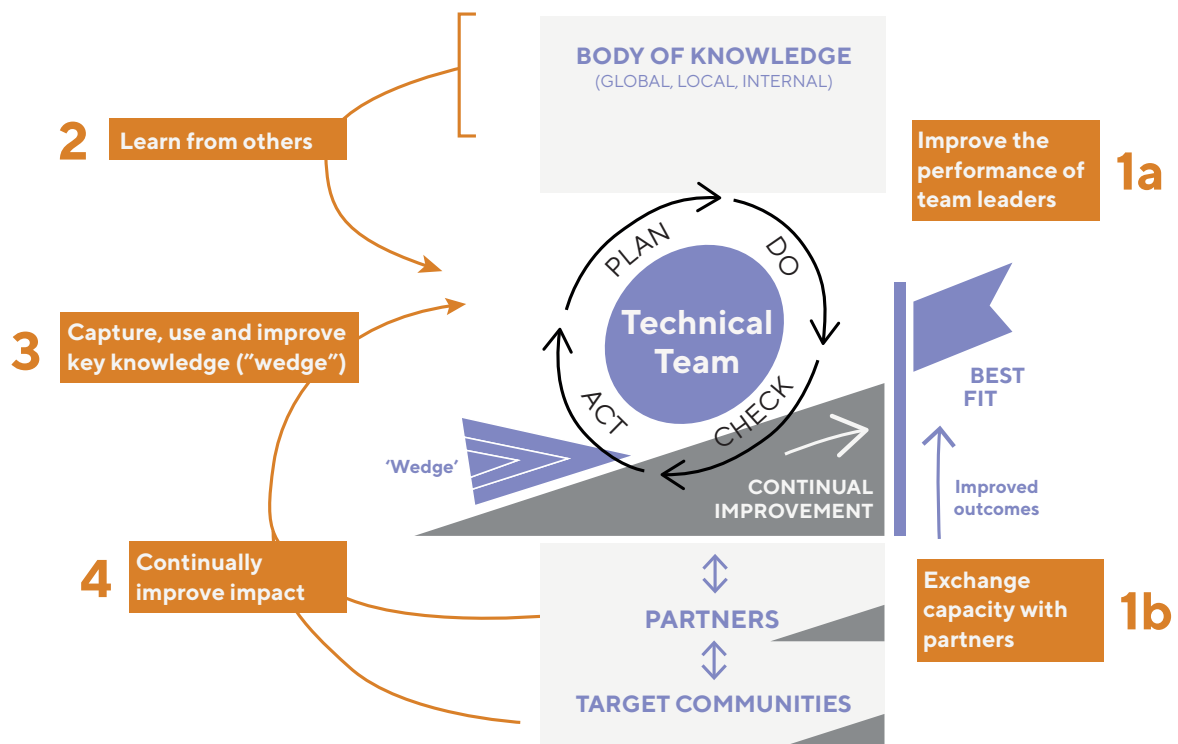
The literature review concluded that there was no guidance on how to lead humanitarian field teams in this environment, access relevant resources, retain knowledge within and between emergencies, and adapt and continually improve to meet changing local needs. The best foundation to use as the basis for such a guide was identified as a process-based integrated management system, based on a novel use of the International Organization for Standardization’s (ISO) non-linear environmental management standard (ISO, 2015a). The environmental ISO standard is based on the iterative Plan-Do-Check-Act continuous improvement cycle (Deming, 1986). Ideally, the guide would support teams to independently develop site-specific integrated management systems, given their unique cultural diversity, team dynamics and emergency context. This would also meet Castler et al.’s (2011) call to strengthen the competency of field teams directly, without having to rely on consultants, so they can design and implement their own system and effectively communicate relevant aspects of the approach to partners.

The prototype FieldTiK guide builds upon this foundation to fill the gap, providing humanitarian field teams with guidance to learn from others to develop context-specific approaches to improve how they function as a team, and combine the various aspects of humanitarian response together holistically within a dynamic environment. It is a tool that allows the transference of knowledge over time and between people despite high staff turnover and a means to connect people with existing relevant resources, relevant leadership and management practice. The guide is also tailored to a team’s needs, so staff can better meet the needs of people affected by crisis and other local actors, and continuously improve within and over successive emergencies.

Rigorous development

To develop a prototype guide, the research used the paradigm of design science research (van Aken et al., 2016), and employed the underlying theories of adaptive management (Allen et al., 2011), knowledge management (Milton, 2020; Milton & Lambe, 2016) and the learning organisation concept (Senge, 1990). The conceptual framework that guided the research, illustrated in Figure 1, captures the focus on technical field teams, progressing through the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle to move up the continual improvement slope as they improve their outcomes, with a knowledge wedge to capture local best-fit practice. The model incorporates the system-wide environment and the inherent empowering of and learning from partners, where relevant, and target communities. Figure 1 captures the five elements (1a-4) required to solve the research problem.

Figure 1: The conceptual framework of the research



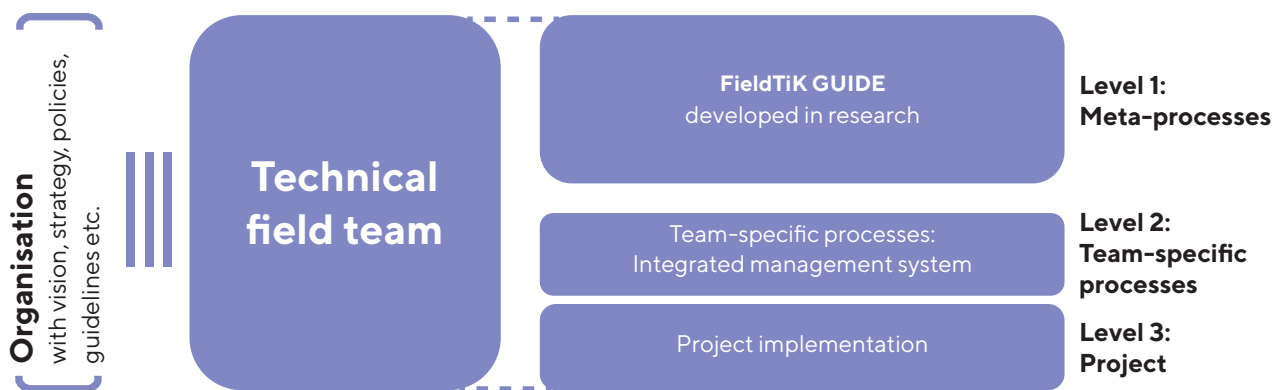
Semi-structured interviews with 20 sector experts were conducted to document challenges and best-fit practices (Ramalingam et al., 2014), and to gather content for the prototype guide, while another 21 interviews were undertaken to evaluate and refine it. Interviewees were members of humanitarian field teams or key stakeholders (e.g., line managers and government officials), with roughly half from the Global South. The interviews were analysed using template analysis (King & Brooks, 2017) and the spreadsheet from framework analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002), and the resulting theme hierarchy became the guide headings. Content analysis of existing resources was used to ensure that the guide built on and complements guidance, such as the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS Alliance et al., 2018).

Innovative solution: Field Team Impact Kit

The Field Team Impact Kit (FieldTiK), as shown in Figure 2, provides guidance and examples (level 1) that a technical field team can use to develop site-specific processes (level 2). These overarching processes support the implementation of individual projects (level 3). The guide is designed to support humanitarian teams to operationalise their overarching organisation's vision, strategy, policies and guidelines.

The guide was developed to be a non-prescriptive, adaptable, non-linear (for a complex environment), modular, bottom-up, action-focused, systems-based, holistic and risk-based tool for technical field teams.

Figure 2: Scope of the FieldTiK guide



Prioritised action

The FieldTiK guide consists of a short team diagnostic questionnaire, followed by modular guidance. Teams follow three iterative steps (Figure 3). First, the team use a diagnostic questionnaire to prioritise tasks, starting with quick wins that are high-impact and low-effort. Second, they action priority tasks, using the modular section for guidance, to develop team-specific best-fit practice, and implement it. Third, every 1-3 months, they review actions to date and tackle new ways to improve performance. A team leader could also use the diagnostic questionnaire as a checklist during the busy first phase of a humanitarian response.

The modular part of the guide follows the structure in Table 1 (see the guide for level 3 headings). Each level 3 heading contains 2-4 pages of guidance for teams to access as needed. The structure was created to capture the challenges and recommendations shared in the first round of interviews, and to engage time-poor practitioners working in widely varying contexts and cultural environments, using the guide voluntarily.

Figure 3: The FieldTiK cycle

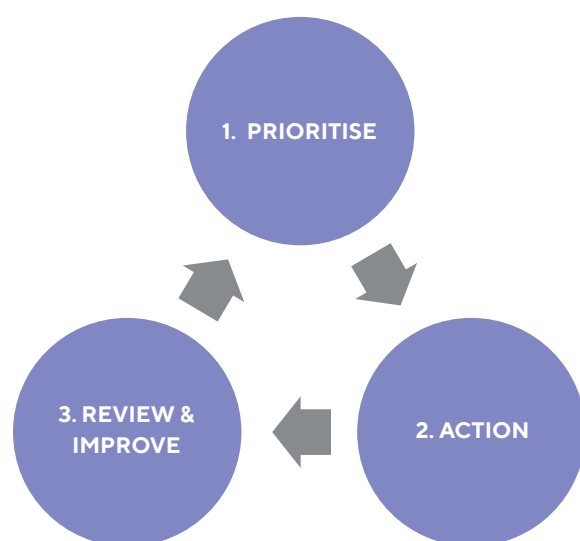


Table 1: Top-level structure of the FieldTiK guide

No.	Level 1 heading	Level 2 heading
1	Create an empowering environment for the technical field team	
2	Accountability to affected people	
3	Locally led response	
4.1	Utilise the power of the team in a time-efficient way	Build trust and appreciate diversity
4.2		Establish a common team direction
4.3		Easy access to information for decision making
4.4		Maintain results during staff turnover
4.5		Consistently achieve a quality outcome
5	Evaluate, continually improve, adapt, innovate	
6	Preparedness	

The information under each level 3 heading is structured around common sub-headings: *Challenges facing technical field teams*, *Recommendation(s)*, *Examples and, where relevant, Resources*. The summary of challenges facing field teams in each area is designed to reassure the user that they are not alone and raise awareness of other issues they should address. It also informs senior decision makers, within the organisation and sector, of the challenges field teams face.

As an example, the *Challenges* section in “access to the latest documents or emails quickly (document control)” includes the following:

Although effective document control is “essential”, “crucial” (Fareed) and “101,” or basic (Amina), participants spoke of “**atrocious**” document handing systems (Isha), it being “**a nightmare**” to access badly organised cloud-based resources (Fareed) and being “**aghast**” (Amina) at the lack of a common shared drive. Emailed links are hard to find again (Orla)—difficult when a “tsunami” of directives can flow through the system from the top (Dharmendra). Many people find Sharepoint (a document management and storage system) difficult to use, and version control “one of the biggest frustrations in management” (Orla). Many donors and management are not concerned with knowledge management, seeing it as a team or individual responsibility (Jairo).

The second sub-heading, *Recommendation(s)*, provides 1–3 objectives for users to meet, using existing or new approaches, in a way that best suits the team in their

unique context and organisational environment. For the same heading, this is “have an agreed method of finding the latest document quickly and easily”.

The third sub-section, headed *Examples*, shares good practices suggested by interviewees, or found in content analysis, for teams to use to meet the previous recommendation(s). It is suggested that users adopt one of the exemplified approaches or use them as inspiration to develop their own approach. They are encouraged to seek out any organisational guidance first. In this way, the guide is adaptable for different contexts and teams.

The final sub-section, headed *Resources*, provides useful documents and websites for the target audience. Relevant technical resources are provided under the level 3 heading “Locally appropriate technical approach that meets diverse needs”. These are currently for WASH, as the author is a WASH specialist, but can be easily updated for other technical areas. Key external guidance, such as the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS Alliance et al., 2018), is referred to throughout the guide in the relevant sections to support teams as they develop their unique approach. The Core Humanitarian Standard will be updated to the latest version (CHS Alliance et al., 2024) in future iterations of the guide.

Sector expert feedback

Seventeen of the 21 sector expert reviewers were very positive about the FieldTiK guide; the remaining four were positive, but more measured in their responses. Experts from the Global South and North responded

similarly. The guide met the design science research indicators: all participants considered the guide would empower technical field teams to achieve a more effective response (pragmatically valid) and addressed a significant field problem (practically relevant).

Feedback from sector experts included:

- “This is the missing element in everything we’re doing”. (Daktari, WASH technical lead, Global North)
- “It would help people to avoid common issues that regularly appear in lessons learned exercises ... This is what is really missing”. (Oceana, ex-government humanitarian, Global South)
- “It would empower temporary team leaders [surge staff] to identify challenges quickly and transparently, to help them familiarise themselves and target the right team processes to improve. It should facilitate open communication that allows team issues to be raised while avoiding personal issues”. (Diya, senior manager, Global South)
- “Very practical”. (Jairo, country humanitarian lead, Global South)
- “Very, very useful”. (Dumi, technical training lead, Global South)
- The guide “addresses an enormous gap in the humanitarian sector” that we have previously been putting “bandaids” on rather than “tackling the roots”. (Bisa, WASH advisor, Global North).

The interviewees saw the guide as particularly useful for teams in national organisations, with some suggesting that it would be more useful to them than for teams in international organisations. Diya, from the Global South, a top-level manager in an international organisation, thought “local NGOs are probably one of the biggest customers” of the guide, assuming the guide was available in local languages. She felt that the training programs in which local NGOs often invest are not specific and are theory based, whereas the guide was “very practical” and designed for “the people implementing on the ground.” Other expert reviewers felt that additional promotion, contextualisation and capacity development to support access, understanding and use would be needed for field teams in national organisations. All participants thought that the potential benefits of the guide outweighed the time and resources required to implement it.

Benefits

The experts who reviewed the prototype FieldTiK guide identified that it could improve:

- accountability and outcomes;
- localisation;

- continuity, ability to adapt and continually improve, both within and between responses;
- well-being and retention of staff;
- system-wide response;
- operationalisation of organisations’ visions and policies; and
- relations with donors.

The FieldTiK guide complements existing humanitarian initiatives, introducing new teams and/or leaders to the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS Alliance et al., 2024; CHS Alliance et al., 2018) and other global guidance, such as Mercy Corps’ (2015) tips for adaptive management. Its foundation on the iterative Plan-Do-Check-Act continual improvement cycle means the approach encompasses adaptive management and learning initiatives, such as action learning. The guide also links to existing project management guidance and shares tools used in agile project management. It should enhance donor-to-field team project-based guidance like Groupe URD’s quality and accountability compass (Groupe URD, 2018). Building from, and linking teams to, this guidance should make them more efficient, adaptable and accountable, and able to work more effectively with affected people, government, other local actors, donors and management.

The FieldTiK guide should improve the respect, trust and communication between field teams and management, and the operationalisation of the organisation’s strategy and policies. It should complement leadership approaches such as transformational leadership (Bass, 1985), by providing a structured approach to empower field teams. The approach also meets relevant criteria in four leading team empowerment and thriving models (Haas & Mortensen, 2016; Hackman, 2002; Narel et al., 2019; Salas et al., 2009; Seibert et al., 2011).

The FieldTiK guide should improve the respect, trust and communication between field teams and management, and the operationalisation of the organisation’s strategy and policies.

The guide addresses the challenges facing technical field teams identified in the literature review. It provides practical guidance and tools to strengthen the leadership and management skills of team leaders, as well as team members, working in a dynamic humanitarian environment—providing them with transferrable skills they can use throughout their careers. It strengthens team-based knowledge management by linking field teams to existing relevant resources and improving knowledge retention, within and between emergencies, projects, and staff change—critical for converting lessons identified into change in practice. The underlying framework,

built around the iterative Plan-Do-Check-Act continuous improvement cycle and international good practice in non-linear management, enhances the team's ability to adapt and continually improve to be accountable to people affected by disaster and support a locally led response.

These benefits showcase the potentially considerable impact of using the FieldTiK guide to overcome many of the challenges facing the humanitarian sector, as part of a bottom-up process of rejuvenating the humanitarian system.

Next steps

The interviewees' recommended a range of steps for the author, researchers, and humanitarian leaders to progress use of the FieldTiK guide. These included:

For decision makers at global, network or organisational level

- Recognise the challenges facing field teams in humanitarian organisations and initiate action; including organisation or sector-wide discussion on how to overcome them, using the guide as a starting point.
- Pilot the guide within a range of teams (from local, national and/or international organisations), ideally within a field office or national cluster. The guide could be customised for the organisation, cluster and/or country.
- Develop an online platform to offer the latest guide and support material, facilitate a community of practice, and collect additional best-fit practice and case studies to continually improve the guide, and refine the approach. The prioritisation process could be automated, to make it simpler for teams, and a summary of areas teams target used to advocate for improved systems and guidance. The guide will need to be translated into multiple languages for widespread use.
- Identify who, within an organisation and across the sector, has overarching responsibility for empowering field teams. Options include human resources and knowledge management departments, but these may reduce engagement by line-management. If it is to be part of knowledge management, it could be known as team-based holistic knowledge management.
- Donors could endorse the guide—like a gender marker—or it could be endorsed by the Core Humanitarian Standard custodians, to facilitate its ongoing (rather than once off) use. Alternatively, individual organisations could institutionalise the approach. A call to action, by interested headquarters-level advisors, to advance donor endorsement was suggested.

For the author

- Develop support and training material, including for facilitating workshops for teams using the guide, implementing it at multiple levels within an organisation, and for how to incorporate the approach in after-action reviews, real-time evaluations and other feedback opportunities to convert lessons into sustainable change in practice. Training material can also be developed for staff onboarding and other internal needs.
- Share the guide across the sector and encourage its use to improve localisation and sector-wide initiatives such as the WASH Roadmap competencies. Discuss it with global bodies, international organisations, clusters and government via presentations and webinars for dissemination and feedback. Present at conferences and learning events. Ask clusters to promote the guide via their monthly newsletters and place it in their central document repositories.
- Contextualise the guide to suit other users, such as national cluster teams, sector-wide coordination, or to improve coordination between affiliate organisations within confederations, such as Oxfam International. The guide may also find traction in other organisations with semi-autonomous field teams.

For researchers

- Research the impact of a field team, field office and/or national cluster piloting or using the FieldTiK guide.
- Conduct further research into technical field teams in humanitarian organisations or the broader grouping of semi-autonomous field teams impacting complex environments.

Conclusion

Technical field teams in humanitarian organisations face significant challenges that the innovative FieldTiK guide can help them to overcome. The guide can assist leadership and management of semi-autonomous teams and the simultaneous empowerment of partners and the target communities. It can inform humanitarian teams about relevant and practical resources, from within and outside the sector, bringing together previously siloed, often elusive guidance in one place. It can support teams to retain local knowledge within and between emergencies, and to improve how they adapt and continually improve to meet changing local needs. The approach supports a demand-led, rather than supply-driven, flow of knowledge, from the field experts who are operationalising their organisation's vision. The FieldTiK guide is considered particularly valuable for field teams in local or national humanitarian organisations to strengthen the locally led response.

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