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Needs assessment; a duality in humanitarian practice?

How does current needs assessment practices facilitate information-sharing among
humanitarian actors?

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Abstract

The current state of humanitarian emergencies stands unprecedented, and have placed humanitarian efficiency at the top of a common agenda. However, any discourse on the efficiency of humanitarian assistance demands that, firstly, the needs must be assessed in a reliable way, and secondly, information about these needs must be shared with other actors involved in the response. This explorative research therefore aims at answering how current practices in needs assessment facilitates information sharing among humanitarian actors. The theoretical framework draws on the strengths form both traditional safety science, and modern organizational theory. By placing humanitarian NGOs under the umbrella of utility-maximizing actors, this thesis argues that the systemic issues must be regarded as organizational failures. Furthermore, the theoretical stance allows for a systemic-understanding of the humanitarian sector, grounded in the presumption that the humanitarian system works as one, is mutually dependent on their members, and that challenges must be coped with together. The study is based on in-depth interviews with a range of humanitarian personnel, combined with an extensive document analysis.

The empirical findings indicate a deviation between normative and actual practices of needs assessments, resulting in a complex picture of how information processing takes place. In extension, a fragmented system, with a strong sense of compartmentalization, combined with a lack of overarching authority, both allows these shortcomings to continue, and provides little incentive to initiate change. Consequently, the process of needs assessments lacks a holistic approach, and continue to be conducted subjectively, through organizational blinders.

The actual role of needs assessments serves a purpose as internal policy documents, instrumental to gaining funding, rather than an evidential basis for objective humanitarian needs. Their role in facilitating information sharing is therefore weak, as they are not mean to be used cross-sectorial, or inter-organizationally.

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No research is ever carried out in solitude.

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Abbreviations

ACAPS	The Assessment Capacities Project
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability
CoC	Code of Conduct
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internal Displaced Person
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organizations
MFA	The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MIRA	Multi Cluster/Sector initial rapid assessment
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NCA	Norwegian Church Aid
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
NPA	Norwegian People's Aid
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	The United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children Fund
UN-OCHA	The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
WASH	Global cluster for water, hygiene and sanitation

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1. Introduction

The world is currently facing some of the most severe humanitarian emergencies in modern times (UN News Centre, 2017). According to United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UNOCHA, a total of 95,3 million people will be targeted by humanitarian aid in 2017(OCHA, 2017). Despite the extensive scope of humanitarian efforts, numerous reports and initiatives account for the persisting failure to meet prevailing humanitarian needs (Stoddard, Harmer, Haver, Taylor, & Harvey, 2015)

Although the amount dedicated to humanitarian efforts is more than ten times larger than a few decades ago, the rapidly rising number of people in need, has led to a funding gap estimated at US$ 15 billion (World Humanitarian Summit, 2016). In order to bridge this gap, the humanitarian system is dependent on reliable information, on which they can base their resource prioritization. Needs assessments can therefore be regarded as a vital tool to collect this information.

In 2003, the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) report *According to need?* (Darcy & Hofmann, 2003), initiated a global discourse on the role needs assessments play in humanitarian decision-making. They debated the importance of a stronger evidential basis for resource allocation, in order to sufficiently uphold the humanitarian principle of impartiality. As part of a first wave to examine the evidential basis for decision-making by humanitarian agencies and donors, their report contributed to putting the role of needs assessments on the international agenda.

Similarly, in 2007, a report from The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD, 2007) underlined how the normative view of needs assessments, as a prerequisite for effective and just humanitarian aid often departs from reality.

This has further been substantiated by the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) in their report *The State of the Humanitarian System* (Stoddard et al., 2015). Stating that good data is a limited resource in humanitarian emergencies, and as the the individual humanitarian organizations[1] need to meet their

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[1] Throughout this document, the term "organizations" refers to all humanitarian aid providers including UN agencies, funds and programs, national and international NGOs, and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

programming needs, the majority of needs assessments continue to be conducted in an ad hoc and uncoordinated manner.

As of 2017, The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) maintain that the role of needs assessments should be to provide a more people-centered, comprehensive understanding of people's needs, on which prioritization for the humanitarian response can be made. Specifically underlining the importance of comprehensive, cross-sectorial, and impartial assessments, to enable joint analysis.

As shown above, reports and evaluations have over the years confirmed the purpose of needs assessments as a tool for prioritization in the humanitarian response. However, a prerequisite for this argument, is that the relevant information collected and analyzed through needs assessments, is both transferable, and made available to other humanitarian actors.

Information processing, which includes the collection, analysis, and sharing of information, has been underlined as a crucial factor for ensuring efficiency in humanitarian response (Moore, Bhide, & Verity, 2016). Although some research has focused on information sharing in the humanitarian context, little has aimed specifically at the role and purpose needs assessment holds, for this vital information sharing to take place.

1.1. Research problem and operational research question

This thesis argues that, for the betterment of humanitarian efficiency, the link between needs assessments and information sharing, must be considered. Needs assessment forms the basis for data in emergencies, and the results are of importance for the whole relief system, not only the particular agency conducting the assessment. As such, information originating from assessments, should ideally flow to all relevant actors. The research problem for the thesis is therefore as followed:

How does current needs assessment practices facilitate information sharing among humanitarian actors?

Ideally, needs assessments should be conducted in such a way that they can easily be shared, and used, by other humanitarian actors. In order to reach a conclusion on the research problem,

it therefore becomes necessary to examine how information processing of these assessments is conducted, and the associated challenges. Previous studies have affirmed an existing gap between the normative and positive view of needs assessments. It is therefore interesting to examine the relation between ideal and actual practices, aiming to provide an answer to the question of how needs assessments facilitate information-sharing. The research questions are therefore as followed:

1. How is information processing among humanitarian actors?
2. What is the relation between ideal and actual practices in assessments?

1.2. Limitations

Information sharing in humanitarian emergency response is a very broad topic, making it necessary to define what areas the research will examine. This thesis focuses on information sharing *among* humanitarian actors, more specifically information originating in needs assessments. The aim is not to offer a comprehensive discussion on the challenges associated with inter-organizational information sharing, but rather to examine how current practices in needs assessments facilitates, or impedes, information sharing. The primary limitations will thus concern the current practices in needs assessments, and how this information is shared among the organizations, in humanitarian emergency response.

Given the complexity of a humanitarian emergency, no single actor or organization can embark upon these challenges alone. This thesis therefore considers the humanitarian system as one, looking at the practices in needs assessment from an overarching perspective. This necessitates a theoretical framework, grounded in a risk management perspective, and reasoned with a variety of different theoretical understandings, to provide a reflected and nuanced understanding of the challenges and dynamics present. The theoretical framework therefore relays on a supplementary understanding from three different stances. Barry A. Turner's (1976) understanding of the *incubation period* is applied, to describe how current practices may cause latent conditions in information processing, within the humanitarian system. With Jens Rasmussen's theory (1997) of 'risk management in a dynamic society', a broader understanding of the dynamic of actors is provided, supplementing Turner's working conditions for misinterpretations and misunderstandings. Lastly, environmental factors are discussed, in light

of Nils Brunsson's (1993; 2002) 'organizational hypocrisy', and Jacobsen and Thorsvik's (2013) technical and institutional settings, aiming to describe their influence on humanitarian actors.

Although the term 'needs assessment', comprises of a variety of different types, methods, and uses, this thesis does not distinguish between the numerous existing assessments. Giving the informants the opportunity to talk about their experiences and intentions, without restricting their perception of what information we wanted, enabled an overarching description of information processing among humanitarian actors. 'Information processing' is in this thesis based upon UN-OCHA's definition which states that: "A strong information management network (…) requires processes to collect, analyze and share information about the situation among the various organizations involved" (OCHA, s.a.).

When referring to 'humanitarian actors', this includes all actors working with the humanitarian response, such as UN agencies, NGOs, and expert capacities. Furthermore, no distinction is made between NGOs and INGOs, as this does not hold a practical relevance for this study.

The context of a humanitarian emergency response involves an extensive number of actors. It is unrealistic to involve all of them in this research, the focus for this thesis will therefore be placed on some of the major humanitarian relief agencies in Norway, Norwegian National Red Cross and Red Crescent Society (ICRC), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) and Norwegian Church Aid (NCA). Additionally, the expert capacities The Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS) and NORCAP, and the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' section for Humanitarian Affairs (MFA), has been interviewed, to get a broader understanding of the topic.

1.3. Previous research

As mentioned, a number of papers have been written about the link between needs assessments and decision-making, (Darcy, Stobaugh, Walker, & Maxwell, 2013), where some have researched the use of evidence for funding allocation (Geoffroy, Léon, & Beuret, 2015; Walker & Pepper, 2007), and others focus on the quality of needs assessments, and their practical applicability (Gerdin, Chataigner, Tax, Kubai, & Schreeb, 2014).

Others have researched information management in a humanitarian context, looking at the capabilities and challenges for information handling in humanitarian emergencies (Day, Junglas, & Silva, 2009; Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 2011), humanitarian information systems in particular (Maxwell & Watkins, 2003), and commonly highlighting the importance of information sharing (Gerdin et al., 2014; OCHA, 2002).

In *Challenges in humanitarian information management and exchange: evidence from Haiti,* Altay and Labonte (2014*)* analyzed challenges to information flow in Haiti, and the implications for an effective humanitarian response. Offering possible solutions for overcoming these challenges, they highlighted the critical role information management can play in shaping an effective humanitarian response, coordination and decision-making. They argued that quality information, reaching more humanitarian actors, will result in better coordination and better decision-making, thus improving the response to beneficiaries as well as accountability to donors.

Dorothea. Hilhorst (2002) discusses humanitarian accountability, in *Being Good at Doing Good? Quality and Accountability of humanitarian NGOs*. Problematizing how there is no single definition of quality in humanitarian action, she underlined how the different organizational styles and cultures are magnified by rivalry and politicking, and concluded that this hampers any joint efforts for a universally acknowledged definition of the term. Substantiating this, Dorothea Hilhorst and Nadja Schmiemann (2002) coupled the importance of quality with the importance of humanitarian principles, in *Humanitarian principles and organizational culture: everyday practice in Medecins Sans Frontieres-Holland.*

2. Context

This chapter elaborates on the key elements of the context for this thesis. The subject of the thesis is to examine how current practices in needs assessments facilitate information sharing.

Section 2.1., provides an introduction to basic emergency terminology, section 2.2, aims to describe the heterogeneous nature of humanitarian actors, section 2.3., offers an overview of the complexities of humanitarian coordination, section 2.4., describes purposes and practices of needs assessments, and section 2.5., looks at the role of information-processing.

2.1. Humanitarian emergency terminology

To discuss the context of humanitarian response, it is first essential to elaborate on the understanding of a humanitarian emergency, in which the humanitarian agencies operate. *"A humanitarian emergency is an event or series of events that represents a critical threat to the health, safety, security or wellbeing of a community or other large group of people, usually over a wide area"*(Humanitarian Coalition, s.a.). Such an emergency typically arises in vulnerable populations, which are unable to handle such events and their consequences. A common distinction is often made between natural disasters, man-made emergencies and complex emergencies. Additionally, crises are characterized by the time-frame in which they occur, and evolve. A common distinction is made between slow-onset, and sudden-onset disasters (WHO, 2008). Slow-onset disasters, such as drought, takes a long time to produce emergency conditions, and is therefore usually accompanied by early warning signs. While sudden-onset disasters occur rapidly, with little or no warning, meaning they are difficult to predict in advance. This puts additional pressure on the humanitarian agencies, who have limited time to assess the needs, and prepare their response.

2.2 Diversity in actors - unity in practice

The humanitarian system is characterized by a diversity of actors, including UN humanitarian agencies, NGOs and INGOs, national and local authorities, governmental and multilateral donors, peacekeeping forces, and the International Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement (Walker

& Pepper, 2007; Hilhorst, 2002). Moreover, the system can be identified by contradictory agendas expressed by *"differing donor bureaucracies, competing policy priorities, informal deficits and institutional incentives"* (Walker & Pepper, 2007, p. 9), as a result of aid agencies operating with different mandates, visions and practices.

The evolution of humanitarianism has been parallel with the expansion in number, and change, of the nature of conflicts and crises. Numerous actors, aiming for the same resources, and without a clear leadership, has created a highly dynamic and competitive environment for humanitarian aid.

As a result of many actors working in the humanitarian field, operating without a common baseline of what aid should entail, and on what grounds it should be provided, many felt that the integrity of humanitarian work was threatened. The Code of Conduct (CoC) was therefore established in 1994, as a common set of standards, aiming to ensure that aid is given on the basis of need alone, unregarded of hidden motives, such as political, religious or ideological grounds (D Hilhorst, 2005; ICRC, 2004).

In addition to the classic principles of neutrality, impartiality, independence and humanity, a growing focus on accountability, and the need for both appropriateness and contextualization, has become important aspects of current humanitarian practices. This can be seen as a result of lessons learned by the humanitarian organizations themselves. In addition to increased demands for the transparency and accountability of humanitarian organization, there has also been a growing focus on assessing the quality and efficiency in the humanitarian sector. The humanitarian principles *"may be considered the basis of any definition of quality of humanitarian assistance"* (Hilhorst, 2002, p. 3).

2.3 Humanitarian coordination

The shortcomings and failures of the humanitarian action in the humanitarian crises in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina during the mid-1990s, triggered a fundamental revaluation of humanitarian response. The interagency evaluation of the humanitarian response in Rwanda, set a new focus on accountability, concluding that many more lives could have been saved if

the humanitarian organizations had coordinated their activities and acted more professionally (Hilhorst, 2002).

In the last decades, there have been several initiatives aiming to improve and strengthen core elements, such as accountability and transparency, in humanitarian aid. Of special importance is The Humanitarian Reform of 2005 (OCHA, 2006) which introduced the cluster approach to improve the humanitarian system in terms of predictability, accountability, leadership and partnership. By clarifying the division of labour among organizations, and better defining their roles and responsibilities within the different sectors of the response, the cluster approach was a way of addressing gaps and strengthening the effectiveness of humanitarian response. A cluster is a group of humanitarian organizations (UN, and both national and international NGOs) working within the main sectors of humanitarian action. Clusters are meant to improve efficiency with; sufficient global capacity to meet current and future emergencies; predictable leadership at local and global level; strengthened partnerships between UN-bodies, NGOs and local authorities; accountability, for the response and beneficiaries; and strategic field-level coordination and prioritization (Jensen, 2010, p. 6).

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) is the primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian efforts, and decides which clusters to mobilize during any particular operation. Each global cluster is led by one designated agency. UN-OCHA works closely with the global cluster lead agencies and NGOs, and work to ensure the coordination between clusters, at all phases, including needs assessments, joint planning, monitoring and evaluation (OCHA, 2006). As the cluster approach is not based on a consensus with all involved relief organizations, their involvement and thereby response to the situation, can vary considerably.

2.4. Needs assessment

The humanitarian principle of impartiality states that, "*humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress*" (OCHA, 2012) It thereby predicates on the assumption that the system can accurately measure need, unbiased, and continually. Without this, there is no baseline to judge the impartiality, appropriateness, or efficiency, of the humanitarian assistance (Walker & Pepper, 2007, p. 14).

The humanitarian actors measure need through assessments, which can be described as *"the set of activities necessary to understand a given situation. They include the collection, up-dating and analysis of data pertaining to the population of concern (needs, capacities, resources, etc.), as well as the state of infrastructure and general socio-economic conditions in a given location/area"* (UNHCR, 2006, p. 4). As assessments are used to identify factors that pose as critical threats to the well-being of crisis-affected populations, they are meant to inform and quantify resource requirements (Darcy & Hofmann, 2003), and can be regarded as overall description of a sense making process in a crisis (ACAPS, 2016).

> *"This process, in theory, provides the necessary platform for decision makers to allocate resources and design appropriate responses in a timeframe appropriate to the urgency of the situation"* (Darcy et al., 2013, p. 30).

Amid differing, and sometimes contradictory, understandings, opinions, and agendas among humanitarian actors, *"needs assessments are typically subsumed within a process of resource mobilization, with assessment being conducted by agencies in order to substantiate funding proposals to donors"* (Darcy & Hofmann, 2003, p. 10). The purpose of needs assessments can therefore be understood from different perspectives. Both as a means of informing and quantifying resource requirements by identifying factors that pose as critical threats to the well-being of the crisis-affected populations, and, as a means of substantiating funding proposals.

Practices in needs assessments differ with regard to the context of a crisis, taking into account the type or nature of an event, aspect of time, and degree of severity. They can therefore be differentiated based on, whether they are conducted by a single-agency or in collaboration with multiple actors, the time frame they are conducted in, or the level of details they wish to measure. An extensive number of initiatives, standards, tools and guides have been developed to strengthen assessments. Among these, Multi-sector Initial Rapid Assessment Guidance (MIRA) (IASC, 2015b), and the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response, The Sphere Handbook, are the most widely known (TheSphereProject, 2011). The sheer number of needs assessments that can be conducted for a response, and number of standards, tools and guides that can be applied, not only demonstrate the difficulty in collaboration, but also give a strong indication of the challenges of sharing this information.

Recent academic research and agency reports, have helped raise awareness regarding the role of needs assessments in humanitarian assistance, highlighting their vital role in upholding the principles (Walker & Pepper, 2007, p. 14). The ongoing discourse on how to improve accountability and efficiency of humanitarian assistance, has thus specifically been transferred to the practice of needs assessments, as expressed in 'The Grand Bargain. This agreement was launched during the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and endorsed by 30 donors and aid agencies, who collectively command the majority of global humanitarian funding. It states that needs assessments should be impartial, unbiased comprehensive, context-sensitive and timely. In order to achieve this, the agreement demands that the needs assessment process must be *coordinated, impartial, collaborative and fully transparent, with a clear distinction between the analysis of data and the subsequent prioritization and decision-making* (Grand Bargain, 2016). It further specifies that, despite considerable attention given to the quality and coordination of needs assessments in recent years, there remains a lack of shared understanding and expectations. Uncoordinated, individual assessments results in poor resource allocation, duplications and unnecessary burden on populations. The Grand Bargain therefore addresses the gap between current practice and need for improvement, as the application of existing practice, fall short of meeting decision-making requirement.

2.5. Information processing

"Information is a central element connecting all actors involved in humanitarian response." *(Altay, 2014, p.4)*

The inherent characteristics of a humanitarian response setting, is marked by extreme uncertainty and short operational life cycles. Additionally, a large number of humanitarian actors are competing for resources, representing different agendas, and attempting to make sense of an unorganized, complex situation (Altay, 2014). Despite efforts to develop coordinating structures and systematically measure need, to facilitate and enhance the flow of information, recent research poses that practices for generating, analyzing and sharing, quality information about needs, remain inadequate (ACAPS, 2013, 2016; Altay & Labonte, 2014; Garfield, Blake, Chataigner, & Walton-Ellery, 2011).

There is a rhetoric consensus regarding the importance of accurately, and adequately assessed needs, for the system's ability to uphold humanitarian principles. However, there are different practices in assessing needs, depending on the characteristics of the emergency, and type of response. Consequently, different agencies conduct their own assessments, based on different methodologies and indicators (ACAPS, 2013). In many ways, needs assessments can be regarded as the basis for the response, as they form the base for the information *"on which decision-making for a coordinated and effective response is based"* (IASC, 2008, p. 8).

Sharing information about needs with other humanitarian actors, may result in better resource allocation, reflect adherence to core principles, and contribute to the overall coordination of the humanitarian response, while helping to achieve an effective humanitarian assistance.

3. Theoretical framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework selected for this thesis: by which the practice of needs assessments, and information-sharing, is analyzed in order to address the research problem.

Section 3.1 explains how latent conditions can occur, as the result of embedded weaknesses in the organization, organizational contextual factors, and active failures by humans. Barry Turner's (1976) theory can therefore serve to explain whether current practices in needs assessment, and information processing, can be regarded as facilitating information sharing. Jens Rasmussen's (1997) theory on the other hand, can offer an explanation as to why such events take place.

Section 3.2 presents Brunsson (1993) and Jacobsen & Thorsvik (2013) understanding of organizational environments, expanding on Rasmussen's take on the social system. Placing the organization within a larger context, acknowledging that their actions are heavily influenced by their environments. These theoretical frameworks can explain current practices from an organizational perspective.

This chapter ends with a theoretical summary in part 3.3.

3.1. Information processing

3.1.1. Failure of foresight

 Barry A. Turner (1976) introduces the theory of Failure of Foresight, explaining how accidents can be perceived as the result of embedded weaknesses in the organization, guided by contextual factors, and as a result of active failures by humans. Further, he described how lack of information flow, and misperception among individuals in organizations, can lead to an accumulated chain of events, which in turn may result in accidents. According to Turner (1976), the development of accidents should hence be regarded as a process, where several warnings can be identified in hindsight. Moreover, Turner (1976) argued that discrepancies are allowed to pass unnoticed in organization due to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of hazard signs, which are imbedded in the organizational characteristics. To name a few, these may be understood as erroneous assumptions, neglection of outside complaints, cultural differences, and failure to comply with regulations and procedures (Turner 1976, p. 378).

Uncertainty

Turner proposes that for actors, there will always be some uncertainty as to whether the action will be adequate to attain the desired goal, the actors will therefore try to reduce the uncertainty "*by following rules of thumb, rituals, relying on habitual patterns, or, more self-consciously, by setting goals and making plans to reach them*" (Turner, 1976, p. 378). While these coping strategies might provide, the certainty needed to initiate organizational action in the present, members of organizations can never be certain that their present actions will be adequate to attain their desired goals in the future. This problem of prediction is therefore sometimes resolved by creating small areas of certainty which can be handled, or the problem is redrawn in a more precise form which ignores the features that are not quantifiable or difficult to specify. Action is therewith made possible by the collective simplification of assumptions about the environment, producing a framework of 'bounded rationality' (Simon, 1957). More specifically this entails that when a task grows to an unmanageable size, resources may either be increased to handle the now larger problem, or parts of it may be passed on to other organizations (Hirsch, 1975). Alternatively, the task may shrink to match the resources available, or the information-management capacity (Meier, 1965). According to (Weick, 1998), these simplifications are more commonly understood as *world-views, frameworks,* or *culture,* by which members determine what information to ignore in order to reduce their confusion. These strategies

resolve the problem of what to do next, by simplifying the manner in which the current situation is interpreted, and offering a way to decide what to ignore (Turner, 1976). However, if these strategies are unsuccessful, the result can be the accumulation of latent conditions for accidents, bringing the organization into an *incubation period* (Turner, 1976).

Incubation period

In particular, Turner presents four grouping of misunderstandings, which when accumulated, can lead the organization into an incubation period.

Events can go unnoticed or be misunderstood due to erroneous assumptions, as a result of institutional rigidities of belief and perceptions. Information is then disregarded, either because no one expected it, or because it was explained away as an alternative, *decoy phenomena*. The humanitarian emergency response is structured in such a way, that organizations work with a specific sector, or cluster, focused on one area of expertise, e.g. WASH, shelter, health. Meaning that the data which the humanitarian response is based upon, may be collected based upon its perceived relevance for the organization's work within their expertise, and shared primarily with other actors working within the same sector/cluster. Factors, which may reinforce institutional rigidities of belief and perception, and resulting in relevant information being disregarded. Turner (1976) states that acting based on such a perception may lead to the full nature of the phenomena being misunderstood, and distract attention from the true problem, because individuals do not fully understand the extent of the situation at hand, nor being able to see the overarching connection between a single event, and the potential for accident (Turner, 1976; Turner & Pidgeon, 1997).

Events unnoticed or misunderstood because of difficulties in handling information in complex situations. A humanitarian response involves a large number of both small and large humanitarian organizations. Turner proposes that such a heterogeneous nature can increase the opportunity for communication failures to develop, as tasks handled by larger organizations will generate a large number of messages within the organizations. Similarly, it is regarded as more likely that failures of communication occur, when a task is handled by several agencies than by a single agency, as the organization's distinctive subculture and framework of bounded rationality may give rise to erroneous assumptions about who is handling what portion of the problem (Turner, 1976). Additionally, other fundamental contextual factors of a humanitarian

emergency, such as if the task is prolonged, large-scale, complex, hasty or vague will also increase the information handling difficulties (Wohlstetter, 1962).

In situations such as humanitarian emergencies, complexity and uncertainty are high, while resources as time, money, and energy are scarce. The amount of information that it is possible to attend to with available resources, hence becomes considerably less than what is needed to generate a full description, or take account of the complexity of the situation. The relevant information becomes a limited resource, meaning the cost of obtaining one set of information must be balanced against obtaining an alternative set (Turner 1976). Everyone will have access to slightly different sets of information, and from that information construct slightly different sets of theories about what is happening, and how to deal with it. It will therefore be difficult to agree on a single description of the situation. Turner underlines that if the information is not sufficiently disseminated and collectively interpreted, it can result in the information unintentionally being distorted and misleading (Turner, 1976).

Effective violations of precautions passing unnoticed because of cultural lag in existing precautions. Can happen when existing precautionary regulations are discredited because they are conceived as out-of-date, or not fitting for the case at hand. This can lead to mismatch between the procedures, standards and regulations, because there may be difficult to find an appropriate standard to judge the ad hoc replacement. This is turn may lead to violations to pass unnoticed (Turner, 1976; Turner & Pidgeon, 1997).

Events unnoticed or misunderstood because of a reluctance to fear the worst outcome. Another factor which may lead to the accumulation of events is when existing danger signs are not perceived, given low priority, treated as ambiguous or as sources of disagreement (Turner 1976, p. 394).

3.1.2. A dynamic society

Turner's understanding of communication failures can be supplemented by Jens Rasmussen's (1997) theory of 'risk management in a dynamic society', in order to provide insight into how, and why, latent conditions may appear in organizations. Rasmussen (1997) incorporates the influence of social systems on an accumulated chain of discrepancies, thereby widening the foundation for examining organizational accidents. He underlined the role of the social sphere, which constructs, regulates, and manages, human behavior in organizations. Rasmussen's

theory therefore provides insight, when attempting to explain the dynamic interactions between the humanitarian actors in a humanitarian response, as it incorporates external, as well as internal factors, affecting individual behavior in dynamic stations.

Although the model of *socio-technical systems* was originally developed and used for industrial organizations, it can easily be transferred to the context of humanitarian emergency, as demonstrated by Olsen and Scharffscher (2004). The model of socio-technical system, emphasizes on the integration of technical aspects, organizational structures and human behavior, and is based on three behavior shaping mechanisms; *work system constraints*, *boundaries of acceptable performance*, and the *subjective criteria guiding adaption to change* (Rasmussen, 1997).

Rasmussen states that human behavior in an organization is shaped by goals and constraints, which must be respected, in order to meet the objectives of the organization. The productivity, and thereby success, of organizations, is dependent on individual competence and organizational flexibility. Managers therefore give the individual actors a degree of freedom, where they are free to modify work procedures and production details, guided by process criteria such as workload, cost effectiveness and risk of failure. This *space of possibilities,* is however limited by work system constraints, boundaries of acceptable performance set by actors on higher levels, and the subjective understanding of these constraints (Rasmussen, 1997; Olsen & Scharffscher, 2004). These boundaries can be understood as explicit administrative regulations, and organizational structures and values. Rasmussen explains that, the *space of possibility* may result in a systematic migration towards the boundary of functionally acceptable performance. If crossing the boundary is irreversible, an error of accident may occur (Rasmussen 1997, p. 189).

This practical and formal competency, is regarded as essential for the actor's ability to reduce vulnerabilities of the system, and to understand the situation adequately, as they will then be able to base their decisions on contextualized information, and avoid untimely, or incorrect decisions. These competences also have high importance in a fast-changing context, such as a humanitarian emergency, as it will increase their possibility of taking appropriate risk-management decisions (Rasmussen, 1997). Kruke & Olsen (2011) underline the importance of possessing knowledge of relevant risks, and hazards sources, when engaging in disseminating, gathering and analyzing information. Additionally, it is important that this knowledge is communicated throughout the system, both horizontally and vertically (Rasmussen, 1997), to

avoid the formation of latent conditions, as stated by Turner (1976). Latent conditions may occur when the space of possibility is formulated vaguely; meaning that expectation of the results may be unclear, roles and responsibilities may be imprecise, or goals may be ambiguous (Olsen & Scharffscher, 2004). As such, a broader understanding of the constraints and boundaries that frame the space of possibilities, can provide valuable insight into why, and how, the latent conditions, as presented by Turner (1976), may occur.

3.2. Organizations as utility maximizing actors

Nils Brunsson's (1993,2006) neo-institutional view of organizations, supplements Rasmussen's understanding of social systems. Brunsson (2006) emphasized the importance of non-economic and non-technical standards, rather than measuring the effectiveness of organizations in terms of profit-loss, market share or timekeeping, as in the traditional view. As stated by Brunsson (1993), many organizations generate little coordinated action, and don't produce clear or obvious products. As this becomes imperative to gaining external support, how then, can we consider organizations such as hospitals, universities, and humanitarian aid organizations?

Brunsson (1993, p. 3) emphasized the role of cultural conditions in the sense of institutionalized rules, norms and expectations, and stated that "***structures, processes and ideologies** are important instruments for gaining external support in all organizations*". He argued that organizations are evaluated not only based on their products, but also by **institutional norms** dictating what their internal lives should be like. Organizations are expected to show the world that they are rational, efficient and democratic, and part of the "*modern project of rationality, progress and justice*" (Brunsson 1993, p. 2). There is an underlying assumption that, in order to survive, and win the respect of share buyers, the state, or **donors**, organizations need to establish legitimacy. This can be done by conforming to the pressure of regulatory agencies, the leading organizations in the field, and the cultural expectations in the society. For many organizations, their structures, processes and ideologies, may be their only instruments for gaining external support.

Brunson's understanding of institutional norms can be related to the concept of organizational environments, as presented by Jacobsen and Thorsvik (2013), where an organization's environment is distinguished into three levels;

The *domain* represents the near environment, consisting of clients, competitors, and collaborators. *National conditions,* which can be understood as political stability, economic concerns and cultural aspects. *International conditions,* stated by the authors as concerns which, to a lesser extent, affect the organization directly, but still influence them. These are understood as international economic trade deals, political events, climate change etc.

According to Jacobsen and Thorsvik (2013, p. 201), the first level is said to have the strongest and most immediate consequences for organizations. In the case of humanitarian organizations, the *domain* consists of the environment closest to them, and affecting their ability to provide assistance. Determining the *national conditions* in our case is nuanced. For humanitarian actors, this can be understood as the country in which a humanitarian operation takes place, for example Sudan or Haiti. But, humanitarian actors belonging to a particular country, for example, Norwegian Church Aid, or Norwegian People's Aid, will also be affected by the national conditions of Norway. The *international conditions* can be understood as political initiatives.

Supplementing the different levels of environments, the distinction of technical and institutional environments is relevant for understanding organizational behavior (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013). The former refers to all external concerns outside of an organization, that directly affect how organization's access resources (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013, p. 203). Available resources (input), technological developments, obtainable knowledge, competency, demands for their product, and competition are all factors that determine organizational capacity of production, or results. *Institutional environments* on the other hand, refer to the *values, norms* and environmental *expectations* that are of importance to how the organization is perceived, and more importantly, accepted in their respective environments.

Failing to comply with expectations in their institutional environments, organizations fall at risk of being perceived as irrational, negligent or indifferent (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013, p. 203). To avoid this, organizations must attempt to formulate goals and organize themselves in

accordance to external believes, cultures and expectations. To gain support from their environments, organizations can use goals and formal structures, exclusively as symbols. In other words, *they can formulate goals and create plans for management, coordination and control that have no practical significance for the work being done* (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013, p. 203). It is underlined how a problem of legitimacy can occur, if organizations fail to meet the expectations from their environments, as a discrepancy can lead to further uncertainty regarding their actions. The term institutional settings comprise of the external culture, which in turn affects the legitimacy of an organization (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013, p. 203). In general, humanitarian actors are largely dependent on legitimacy, both from within the humanitarian community, but also from the general public.

Insight into the dynamics of environments are essential to understanding organizational behavior, as all organizations are dependent on resources, as well as a legitimacy from their environments. The nature of this dependency in turn causes uncertainty, which can be defined *as the difference in information an organization needs to make decisions, and the information an organization already possesses* (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013, p. 198). Furthermore, Jacobsen and Thorsvik (2013) state that the degree of uncertainty determines what kind and how much information organizations need to obtain. The understanding of *work system constraints,* and *boundaries of acceptable performance* helps in analyzing the situation in a holistic manner.

Organized hypocrisy: duality of practice

Institutional norms are often motivated on the grounds that they contribute to greater efficiency, but there is no guarantee that this will actually happen, as what is efficient will often depend upon the specific situation and type of production. When these norms do not agree with the conditions for efficient action, organizations may resort to having two sets of structures, processes, and ideologies. One set for displaying to the outside world, and one set for coordinating action internally. In practice this means that what the management says about the organization and its goals to the outside world, need not agree with the signals it sends to its employees. Brunsson refers to it as an **organizational hypocrisy** when the image projected to the world does not reflect the inner life of the organization.

The theory of organized hypocrisy argues that conflicts arise when organizations are met with contradicting demands by the outside world, and their internal world. Brunsson distinguished between *talk, decision,* and *action,* claiming that an organization can express these in contradicting ways, reflecting the conflicts. In order to satisfy different demands, and lower the level of conflict, the organization can *talk* in one manner, *decide* in another, and *act* in a completely different. Brunsson thereby challenges the traditional view, by stating that *talk* or *decision* pointing in one direction will actually reduce the likelihood of corresponding action actually happening. Furthermore, talk and decision pointing in one direction, does not encourage action in the same, rather they are used as tools to compensate for *action* in the opposite direction. *Talk* and *decisions* might reach a greater audience than *action,* and can therefore be perceived as equally important. Brunsson argues that hypocrisy of this kind creates opportunities by facilitating action in a situation of conflict. It can be regarded as a response to conflicting or contradicting values, ideas or agendas. The modern organization faces a number of external demands, and Brunsson defends hypocrisy as method of handling this conflict. Hypocrisy provides organizations with a degree of freedom, and makes it easier to maintain legitimacy.

A multitude of organizational reports and academic research papers has in recent years sought to highlight the importance of both needs assessments and information sharing. Despite extensive attention and efforts to better the state of needs assessments practice, evaluations show that the prevailing challenges are numerous. Brunsson's theory of hypocrisy may be able to shed light on the mechanisms that leads to a difference between verbal appreciation of information sharing, and common practice.

3.3. Theoretical summary

Turner's framework explains how chains of discrepancies can develop and accumulate unnoticed or misunderstood over time. Among the reasons he presents, the flow and interpretations of information about hazards highly relevant for this thesis, as he points to reasons such as poor communication, ambiguous messages, cultural differences, and beliefs and norms among actors that does not comply with existing regulations. As argued by Olsen & Scharffsher (2004), this is particularly relevant in a humanitarian setting, as the humanitarian response staff often work alongside, and together, in an international environment across both organizational, linguistic and cultural barriers.

Rasmussen supplements Turner's theory with a more in-depth analysis of the individual '*space of possibilities*' left to workers in the organization, which may serve as an explanation of the workers' lack of attention to information-sharing or hazards, as a drift in attention due to heavy workloads and more pressing operational problems. Revisiting Turner's theory, this can be understood as events leading up to latent conditions.

The concept of external support (Brunsson, 1993), and institution and technical settings, as presented by Jacobsen and Thorsvik (2013), can further be seen in connection to Rasmussen's understanding of *work system constraints* and *boundaries of acceptable performance.* Highlighting the influence of external environments on the organizations work, Brunsson proposes that organizations need to have to set of strategies, structures, and ideologies. One which comply with external norms and expectations, another to ensure efficiency in their work.

4. Research design and methodology

This chapter aims to elaborate on the research methodology used for this thesis, from analyzing the initial set of questions to be answered, to elucidating the conclusions about these questions (Yin, 2003, p.20). This will be done by highlighting the three main phases of the social research design: planning, executing and reporting, as well as explaining the methodological choices made in each phase (Blaikie, 2010). The research for this thesis has been conducted through a qualitative approach, and was performed through document analysis and in-depth interviews.

To get a better understanding of the practices in needs assessment, an exploratory research approach was initially adopted. This was done to get a better understanding of how the problem should be posed, what the appropriate data would be, and to develop ideas for how it might be researched.

In the initial phase of exploratory research, the topic was investigated extensively, leading to a problem being posed, and the formation of research questions to be answered. In the second phase a descriptive approach was adopted, with the purpose of seeking to present an accurate account, of the practices in needs assessment, and information sharing among humanitarian organizations. The following sections of this chapter explains the methodological choices made in this process. Section 4.1. explains the research design and strategy. Section 4.2. presents the selection of data. Section 4.3. Discusses data reduction and analysis, and Section 4.4. covers methodological discussions.

4.1. Research design and strategy

The research problem was adjusted based on what was discovered during the first exploratory phase, and examined more thoroughly during the second phase. The main component emerged to concern the current practices in needs assessments, and how these facilitate information sharing. To help produce a conclusion, a set of research questions were needed to provide a framework and set boundaries for what would be studied. This helped narrow down the research problem and produce variables. The research questions are as followed:

1. How is the information processing among humanitarian actors?
2. What is the relation between ideal and actual practices in assessments?

4.1.1. Abductive research strategy

It was decided that an abductive research strategy in accordance with Jacobsen (2016) and Blaikie's (2010) understanding of the term, would be most suitable for this thesis. Blaikie (2010) states that it is the social world of the social actors, that make up the starting point for an abductive strategy. It is these actors, their constructions of reality, and their tacit knowledge, that give meaning to their world. Blaikie (2010) further explains that this can only be discovered from the accounts social actors provide.

Abductive research strategy is described as the continuous interaction between the theoretical framework and empirical findings. The research is therefore seen as an ongoing process, where new findings generate new questions, that generate the need for further research. This can be illustrated by the back-and-forth adjustment between the theoretical framework and empirical findings in this study. The insights gained through in-depth interviews demanded new or different theories, and the theories further formed our goals and ambitions for the interviews conducted (Jacobsen, 2016).

4.1.2. Research process

Table 4.1. Summary of the core steps taken during the research process.

When	What	Why	Outcome
Period 1: **November 2016 – February 2017**	Document review	To gain knowledge about the topic	Broader understanding of the topic, initial formulation of research theme
	Literature review of previous research	To gain knowledge about previous research, and explore possible angles for the research	The creation of preliminary research problem and questions
	Contacted NGOs	To establish a network of informants	Obtained contact information for two possible informants
	Establish a theoretical framework and develop an interview guide	To establish a clear limitation for the research and decide the focus of the interviews	Establishment of a preliminary theoretical framework, and the creation of an open thematic interview guide
Period 2: **March – mid-April 2017**	Informal interview with an INGO	To get a better understand about how aid agencies work, both in the field and in HQ.	Refinement of the interview guide and theoretical framework. Obtained contact information for four possible informants
	Document review	To gain an understanding of the framework of a humanitarian response	Gained greater understanding about the actor's roles, and the humanitarian structure
	Document analysis	Produce findings, related to the theoretical stance	Analysis of a total of nine documents. Gained an in-depth understanding of technical structures, formal procedures, and common challenges.
	Formal interviews with humanitarian actors	Produce findings related to the theoretical stance and findings from the document analysis	Seven in-person interviews with informants. Two Skype-interviews with informants
	Analysis of data	To explore the empirical findings, and relation to the theoretical framework	Adjustment of research problem and questions.
Period 3: **Mid-April – June 2017**	Phone-interview with informant	Produce findings	Supplementation of experience from field-level.
	Contact with previous informants	To clarify statements from previous interview, and to ask additional questions	Adjustment of empirical findings, better understanding of coordination mechanism
	Data reduction and analysis	Reducing the complexity of the data, by creating an overview. Analysis of the correlations between findings, and the theoretical framework	Answer the research problem based on the empirical findings and the theoretical framework.

Period 1

The preliminary phase of the research consisted of a document study, in order to gain a greater understanding of the practices in needs assessments and information-sharing in humanitarian response. The initial idea was to research information-sharing among the Norwegian aid agencies, but it soon became clear that there is a clear distinction between the organizations present in Oslo with regards to their direct involvement in the field. In addition to this, most of the big organizations located in Oslo work within different sectors, e.g., WASH, shelter, health, meaning that they do not work with the other organizations located in Oslo, but rather with other NGOs working within the same field of expertise. It was therefore decided to research the topic through the informant's perceptions of needs assessments practices and information sharing, on a general basis.

A literature review was conducted, resulting in the formulation of preliminary research problem and research questions, and the development of a theoretical framework and an interview guide.

Period 2

Nine formal interviews were conducted. The majority of the interviews were conducted in-person in the premises of the agencies in Oslo. The remainder of the interviews, with informants residing outside of Norway, were conducted via Skype. The interviews were processed continuously by both authors, by listening to, transcribing, discussing and reflecting upon the data. An additional component to this period, was the document analysis conducted.

Period 3

The third period consisted of supplementing data collection, data reduction, and analysis of the data. Some of the earlier informants were contacted again via phone, for additional questions, and to clarify statements from their interviews. The considerable amount of data collected was then reduced to a manageable amount for answering the research problem and research questions.

4.2. Data collection

The data collection was conducted through document analysis, and semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. We chose these approaches for data collection for two reasons. Firstly, we saw the limitations on time and money, as challenges for conducting a field research. In our opinion, there would not be enough time, to sufficiently conduct an effective field observation. The lack of initial resources in terms of knowledge and information about the humanitarian system, as well as lack of a personal network, made this planning difficult. In order to gather relevant information, humanitarian agencies in Norway were therefore contacted. Secondly, the focus of the thesis is a systemic understanding, requiring an objective viewpoint. Aiming to avoid the risk of falling into "the humanitarian bubble", getting too involved with and sympathetic to the actors, at the expense of our objectivity, we decided a document study combined with a interviews, would be the best approach.

4.2.1. Document study

The documents used in this study comprises of reports, evaluations, reviews, and policy documents. A review was conducted to gain an overview of the topic, greater knowledge about practices in information processing, and understanding of current challenges. This framed our research design, and proved vital for the formulation of our research problem and operational research questions. Additionally, a document analysis was undertaken before the formal interviews, but also after, to supplement findings from the interviews. The findings from the document analysis, on current practices, real-time challenges in the field, and organizational policy frameworks, helped frame our interviews. Both in terms of what questions to ask, as well as providing us with the ability to steer the conversation back on track.

There has been published a number of reports and evaluations on needs assessments practices, the link between needs assessments and decision making, and different types of needs assessments. Finding similar documents on the topic of information sharing, has however proved a difficult task. There has been some focus on the role of information in a humanitarian response, and challenges to information flow. However, these documents have rather been written in the context of humanitarian coordination. As the purpose of this thesis is to research how needs assessment practices facilitate information sharing, not how information sharing facilitates coordination, few of these documents have proved applicable. This is reflected in the

empirical framework, where the findings concerning needs assessment have a stronger backing by documents, in comparison to the findings regarding information sharing.

4.2.2. Informants and sampling

The selection of informants was aimed at representatives from leading Norwegian humanitarian organizations. Initially, we contacted the organizations through their *post@organization.no* e-mail addresses. We quickly learned that these e-mails were largely ignored. We therefore reached out to our personal contacts in the sector, who acted as door-openers, by establishing contact within a number of organizations. We were also reliant on snowballing, where new informants put us in touch with other informants. Realizing that this method can lead to a less nuanced data collection, where informants put us in contact with other informants with a similar understanding of the topic, we decided to reach out to a completely different set of informants, not limited to Oslo.

From the perspective of headquarters in Oslo, an in-depth understanding of needs assessment was not always prevalent. This showed us that working with needs assessment, in reality is a very specialized task, and secondly, that not all organizations based in Norway directly conduct their own needs assessments. It was therefore somewhat difficult to find informants with the knowledge, and first-hand experience, we were looking for, solely from the headquarters in Oslo. As a result, we sought out individuals from regional offices, who had not only worked directly with conducting assessments, but also had direct experience with current information sharing mechanisms.

4.2.3. Interviews

As the major Norwegian humanitarian agencies are headquartered in Oslo, we travelled there to conduct them in person. Additionally, some interviews, with informants not located in Norway, were interviewed over Skype. An audio recorder was used to ensure an accurate account of the interviews. This also enabled us to engage fully with the informants during the interviews, instead of having to focus on transcribing what they said. The interview guide consisted of a open-ended topics, which guided the interviews, without restricting or steering the informant's answers in any particular direction.

The formal interviews can be divided into two main categories, the ones that were conducted in-person, and the ones conducted via Skype. We strived to personally meet as many of our informants as possible, and the interviews were always attended by both the authors. It was therefore of particular importance to us, to meet them at their offices, in order to reaffirm a sense of "home turf" on their behalf. However, a distinction can be made between the different settings, depending on the position the informants hold in their respective organizations. For the informants working at HQ-level, the personal interviews can be regarded as natural, as we met them directly in their everyday working environments. For the informants from field level on the other hand, the setting can be characterized as semi-natural, as their natural setting would be in the field. Where we were not able to physically meet some of the informants residing outside Norway, we opted for Skype as a solution, rather than by phone. The Skype interviews, although taking place in what would be considered an artificial setting, were some of the most valuable, and lengthy ones.

During the time of processing the empirical findings, we sometimes found ourselves in the need for further clarifications, or supplementary comments. These were sought out through short phone calls.

4.3. Data reduction and analysis

In order to make the data collected suitable for analysis, it was necessary to use data reduction techniques. The importance of data reduction is highlighted by Berg and Lunde (2012, p. 55) in stating that "*qualitative data need to be reduced and transformed (coded) in order to make them more readily accessible, understandable, and to draw out various themes and patterns*". To simplify this process, coding frames were established before the data was collected. However, some re-organization of the coding categories were required after the data collection, such as adding additional categories and narrowing the existing ones (Blaikie, 2010).

During the first interviews, the interview guide contained questions that were based on the document review, and general concepts from the theoretical framework. Based on the new theoretical framework, established from the understanding derived from the initial interviews, we were able to refine the questions and coding categories, before the rest of the interviews were conducted. During the whole phase of data collection, there was a continuous ongoing

process of analysis, in order to uncover possible interconnections between the theoretical framework and the data collected. This enabled changes in the research questions formed, when the new data, gave new insight or perspectives.

4.4. Methodological reflections

This section discusses how the data collection methods may have influenced the research results, in terms of reliability and validity. Where reliability refers to the dependability or consistency of the research, while validity refers to the authenticity, or truthfulness, of the research (Neuman, 2006). These terms are well suited for a critical discussion of the conclusions in this thesis, based on the data collection and analysis of empirical data.

4.4.1. Reliability

The reliability of the research is considered with regard to the consistency of the findings from the document analysis, and the interviews. As data collection, in qualitative research, is an interactive process that makes it necessary to use a range of different methods that are not likely to be repeated, it is not likely that the results of the research could be replicated the way it would be expected to be in quantitative research (Neuman, 2006).

However, the reliability of the research can be assessed by the consistency of the content of the data collected. During the initial phase of the research we spent a considerable amount of time reviewing reports and other documents on the topic, as well as speaking to key informants, in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the humanitarian emergency response, and the key problems within this system. On the basis of this knowledge, a research problem was formulated, focused on the problems of the real world, instead of what other researcher may have assumed it to be, or what theoretical points of view may suggest. For the next phase of the research, this meant that we were able to seek a deeper understanding of the system and problems we wished to describe. The findings from the second period corresponded well with the findings from the first period, despite of the scope of the research and the theoretical basis being narrower. Though the informants not only work in different humanitarian organizations, but also on different levels of operation i.e. headquarters and field-level, they still expressed the same challenges. This shows that the same information can be collected across different

organizations, and level of operation. The accuracy and consistency of data, increases the reliability of this research. Additionally, the findings were further substantiated by documents.

4.4.2. Validity

Validity refers to the researcher's quest of being balanced, honest, and fair, in their interpretations, and remain true to the experiences of the people in the study (Neuman, 2006).

Internal validity

Internal validity refers to the degree to which the research design, produce a conclusion that is presented in a manner free of error, and that the presented findings are recognizable to the informants (Neuman, 2006).

To ensure the validity of the data collection, ambiguous statements were always clarified by asking additional questions, both during the interviews, and after, when this was needed. This ensured that the informant's statement was not misunderstood, and therefore decreased the potential of the statement, and meaning of the informant, being distorted.

In the cases where there was disagreement about an interpretation of a statement, the informant was consulted directly, or the primary data was consulted, meaning the audio recordings of the interview. Additionally, in those cases when it was difficult to draw open and clear connections between the informant's statement and the analysis, that particular data, or finding, has been disregarded. This has been done strategically to avoid having our biased opinions influence the research.

As the research of this thesis has been conducted by two persons, we had the possibility of always discuss the data as it was collected. This enabled us to reflect upon the data, and compare our understandings of it, throughout the process. Even though it is inevitable to some extent be shaped by subjective interpretations, the process of comparing notes and our interpretations, decreases the chances of interpreting the social actors accounts based on our individual understanding. As well as, increasing the ability to present an understanding true to the meanings of the actors involved in the study.

External validity

External validity refers to the ability to generalize the findings from this study across other similar settings (Neuman, 2006).

The informants represent some of the biggest humanitarian agencies with offices in Norway, in addition to the expert capacity ACAPS. As all of these actors, and their experience with the practices of information processing, stems from experience in humanitarian emergencies all over the world, there is strong incentives to claim that the external validity of this study is high.

As substantiated in chapter 3, the actors involved in humanitarian emergencies are mainly the same, regardless of geographical, cultural or triggering factors. Furthermore, the ideological, and cultural foundation of organizations, are hence the same in all humanitarian emergency responses. Lastly, our informants respond to our questions with background, and personal experience, from several humanitarian emergencies, ranging from the typhoon in the Philippines (2013), earthquake in Nepal (2015), and the current situation in Lebanon. It can therefore be argued that despite of the small sampling of actors interviewed for this study, the informants versatile background and large number of supporting documents confirms the external validity of this study.

4.4.3. Reflections on the research design

As researchers, we approached this topic with very little previous knowledge, and understanding, of the complexity of a humanitarian emergency response. An abductive approach, with qualitative data collection, was therefore an obvious choice of research.

Our limited initial knowledge on the topic, also meant that we were able and open to understand, and analyze, the topic with "fresh" eyes, without holding any personal or academic prejudices. This study is not founded in any organizational subcultures, political motives, or ideological perspectives. Although our academic background from theories in risk and safety management probably has influenced our understanding of the humanitarian actors' information handling.

As mentioned earlier, there is little evidence in reports and evaluations backing the connection between needs assessments and information sharing. It has been difficult to find suitable documentation on the role of needs assessments for information processing, and even more difficult to find recent documentation. Meanwhile, we have tried to use as recent documentation

as possible. This has been important as the field of humanitarian is continuously changing, with new tools, initiatives and guidelines. Furthermore, the technological advances in the field of needs assessments have proven game-changing in recent years, and we have not successfully been able to incorporate their importance in our descriptions. With regards to the issue of sampling, our study would have been strengthened by comments and insight from a broader number of informants. For example, we have not been able to speak with a representative from MSF HQ.

A field observation study would have provided valuable first-hand insight into the practices of needs assessment and information processing, particularly in regards to the cluster mechanism. Such an approach could have strengthened the research. However, the lack of contacts, time and money constraints, made this difficult to carry out. The choice of not going into field, led to the option of looking at the topic from an overarching perspective. Although this put us at risk of not achieving an adequately first hand, in depth, understanding of the topic, we argue that it ultimately seems to have strengthens the transferability of the study. As the findings from our interviews are consistent with both the findings from our document study, previously conducted research, and corresponds with ongoing debates on the subject.

5. Empirical findings

The humanitarian actors' ability to provide needs-based aid does not solely rely on how needs are assessed, but also on how information about those needs is processed among the humanitarian actors. Additionally, as it is a prerequisite for the humanitarian principles, that aid shall be based on the needs, it is important to explore the relation between ideals, and actual practices, of assessments.

The purpose of this chapter is to explain how the information processing among humanitarian actors is, and to explore the relation between ideal and actual practices in assessments. Subsequently, this will make it easier to answer the research problem of how current needs assessment practices facilitate information sharing among humanitarian actors.

The empirical findings have been structured into two sections. The first section, 5.1., explains the information processing among humanitarian actors. The second section, explores the relation between ideals and actual practices in assessments.

5.1. Information processing

Bellow follows the empirical findings, describing how current practices of information processing are conducted. Information processing entails the collection, analysis and sharing of information, and the empirical findings aim to explore the practical links and correlation between these elements.

The data collected through in-depth interviews, is supplemented by relevant documentation from evaluations and reports. The main findings derived in this study, are categorized, and presented in the following five sections.

5.1.1. Voluntary involvement

There is a large number of actors involved in a humanitarian response, including NGOs/INGOs, UN-agencies, and local and national governments, but there is no clear authority. Although, the national state has the primary role and responsibility to initiate, organize, coordinate, and implement, humanitarian assistance. They are not, however, always capable to fulfill their roles and responsibilities adequately. As one informant pointed out, the government can occasionally

be partly to blame for the humanitarian emergency that has emerged, either as a result of a weak government, that hasn't taken the necessary action at the right time, or because it has ignored the problem altogether. Alternatively, the national government is not capable of fulfilling its roles and responsibilities, due to lack of capacities, resources, or will, or as a result of a lack of trust in the national government. One informant made this statement about the clusters;

> *"If it's coordinated by government it is less sharing. Useless cluster in Sudan, NGOs were not comfortable sharing info. But at sub-level in same cluster, a lot of sharing."* (informant #1, NRC field)

Empirical findings indicate that lack of authority to regulate the humanitarian response leads to inefficiency, makes roles and responsibilities unclear, and leaves the system without a clear leadership to ensure collaboration and cooperation among actors. Therefore, it ultimately affects the information processing among humanitarian actors.

> *"Everybody is frustrated by the lack of efficiency in the system. There is no system in the humanitarian system. There are too many actors, and no one to regulate."* (informant #6, NCA HQ)

There have however been efforts to improve this. The cluster approach, which was introduced in 2005, aims to improve the coordination of humanitarian aid through clusters which are divided into fields of expertise. The informants underlined the importance of the cluster-arrangement for information-sharing, as this can be perceived as a main arena for formal inter-organizational collaboration. Although voluntary to take part in, there are outlined a set of minimum commitments for participation if the organizations do choose to take part. The minimum commitments include "*commitment to humanitarian principles, the Principles of Partnership, cluster-specific guidance and internationally recognized programme standards (...)*" (IASC, 2015, p. 24). Likewise, an active participation in cluster activities, and collective cooperation, is regarded a necessity. This includes a requirement for a

> "*commitment to work cooperatively with other cluster partners to ensure an optimal and strategic use of available resources, and share information on organizational resources*" (IASC, 2015, p. 25)

Some informants regard the voluntary aspect of the clusters as problematic, and states that it hampers the coordination of an overall response. Others state that a mandatory involvement

could, in some situations, be regarded as conflicting with their mandate, as it is important for them to be independent and impartial. A mandatory involvement in UN-led coordination mechanism, could be viewed as contradicting to these principles. Regardless, all our informants firmly state that they engage in the cluster's coordinated activities within the realm of their organizational mandates. The differences in mandates and agendas are important factors when regarding involvement in coordinating activities. As mentioned, the voluntary nature of humanitarian response leaves it up to the organizations themselves, to decide in which coordination mechanisms they wish to take part in, and also to what extent they wish to contribute.

5.1.2. Organizational agenda

In addition to many forms and types of humanitarian actors, the playing field is characterized by differentiating and sometimes contradictory mandates, often depending on their area of specialization. Anchored in the humanitarian principles, these mandates frames organizational terms of reference for operation.

The importance of information sharing was underlined by almost all the informants, yet several revealed that they had experienced reluctance to share information in the field. Firstly, many informants state that they cannot share information regarding *organizational issues*, but do strive to share information about the ongoing response; what type of assistance they are providing; in which area they are operating etc. However, when asked to elaborate on what counts as organizational issues, the informants answered vaguely, and stated this could entail a large specter of details. Secondly, reluctance or unwillingness to share information was often reasoned by differing mandates. In many cases, the organizational mandate prohibits organizations from openly sharing information about their beneficiaries, and their needs. What one informant referred to as arrogance from the big actors, can be traced to not only their mandates, but also their independent nature, as they are not as reliant on the other humanitarian actors, for their work.

> "*ICRC are restrained due to their mandate, and MSF are not very active in the general coordination mechanisms*" (informant # 4, NPA).

MSF and ICRC was stated to be less likely to share information with other organizations, and less involved in the coordination mechanisms. This was viewed as problematic, particularly by actors who do similar work in the field.

> *"ICRS works differently anyway, even if they withhold info it doesn't impact us so much. But we do similar work as MSF, which hampers our response"* (informant # 1, NRC).

ICRC firmly states that protecting their source is a vital aspect of their mandate. Our informant maintains the importance of universal access, without *need* being a politicized topic, *"the civilians are most important"* (informant #2, ICRC HQ). This implies that maintaining access to affected populations, is given a higher priority than sharing information about their needs to other actors. Based on their mandate, the risk of putting their beneficiaries in danger, either at the hand of their local governments or by the hands of international NGOs, is understood to be far greater, than the risk accompanied with withholding information. Likewise, MSF highlighted the importance of being able to give aid, maintaining that this is more important than coordinating their response with other humanitarian actors, *"we take pride in being independent"* (informant # 8, MSF field). Despite of this, the informant states that, *"we do take part, (but) we are outside of the cluster. We try to inform, to avoid overlap, but we are not mandated by UN or what they suggest."* (informant # 8, MSF field).

A difference in agendas also becomes clear when regarding cooperation in conducting needs assessments. While the overall attitude towards coordinated assessment is positive, many complications and challenges are highlighted. The informants strongly maintain that the need for agency specific needs assessments will always be prevalent, and *"the reality is that a coordinated assessment will never replace an agency assessment"* (informant # 1, NRC). Several reasons are mentioned for the importance of agency specific assessments. Firstly, organizations need to ensure the quality of information provided by an assessment, and that the assessment covers their particular mandate and area of specialization. Secondly, they need to ensure that the assessment is conducted within a format suited to their organizational procedures. Additionally, informants highlight that coordinated assessments are both time- and resource demanding. When deciding how to prioritize already scarce resources, incentives to conduct collaborated assessments hence appear to be weak.

Even though the informants maintained that collaboration was difficult, they were aware of disadvantages associated with continued individual practices. As substantiated by several

documents, uncoordinated individual assessments result in poor resource allocation, duplications and unnecessary burden on populations (Darcy & Hofmann, 2003; Grand Bargain, 2016; IASC, 2012; OCHA, 2017).

5.1.3. Silos

The humanitarian response system is mobilized in natural and man-made disasters, that go beyond the relief capacity of national authorities alone. Due to their scope and extension of severity, such emergencies necessitates a division of labor. The structure of the humanitarian system is therefore built in such a way that organizations have their own area of expertise, e.g. Health, WASH, shelter, food security etc. Given the dynamic nature of humanitarian emergencies, and the contextual restrains, such as lack of time, resources, personnel, and competencies, it is perceived as necessary with a specialization of tasks. This is not only apparent by the organizational specializations, but also in the structure of the clusters, a coordination mechanism meant as a way of addressing gaps and strengthening the effectiveness of humanitarian response.

Clusters

Within the different clusters there are different mechanism for information processing, and the methods used varies from cluster to cluster. For example, the informants working with WASH explained that this cluster is coordinated through the four W's: what, where, when and who. The data collected by different organizations in the cluster, concerning the four W's, is then fed into Excel, and later processed by an information manager. The purpose of gathering data in this way is so information can easily be shared with relevant parties, both within and outside of the specific cluster. Despite of this, the information flow between the different clusters are stated to often be inadequate. As illustrated by one informant's description of the inter-cluster coordination during the typhoon in the Philippines in 2013: "*As we were working in three different district during the time, we experienced conflicting or differing information*" (informant # 7, NCA field).

Evaluations of inter-cluster coordination confirms this problem, and states a strong sense of various clusters being "*overly compartmentalized" (Jensen, 2010, p. 7)*, hindering information sharing between cluster. This is substantiated by informant # 4 (NPA), stating that *"water is good at water, and shelter is good at shelter"*. Another informant points out that in theory some clusters do go better hand in hand, as WASH and Health for example, or Food security and Nutrition. "*Protection is more separate; in some countries it has been impossible to coordinate with them"* (informant # 1, NCR). However, this does not imply that water and health are indeed good at coordinating amongst each other.

Overall, the findings affirm that the structure of the humanitarian response reinforces a silo mentality, as both the organizational specialization and the cluster approach arguably also hampers the information flow between actors working within different fields of expertise.

The information flow within clusters is stated to be better, and to a large degree functional and beneficial for the organizations. However, as the organizations insist on conducting their own assessments, the silo mentality is further maintained. This consequently leads to assessments results, even within the same working cluster, which reveals different needs and subsequently a different response.

Standardization

A standardized approach to needs assessments aims to form a common baseline on which needs are measured, and facilitate for easily accessible and understandable information. Additionally, it is thought to ease the problem of assessments fatigue, and enable information sharing among actors. However, the empirical findings confirm that a great number of standards and methodologies are applied, and despite of acknowledging the importance of cross-sectorial, and cross-organizational standards, our informants underline the practical difficulties in following these. This practice is confirmed by Darcy and Hofmann (2003), who state that existing standards and benchmarks are neither constantly applied, nor are there an established set of benchmarks to define a common humanitarian agenda.

> "*A lack of standard indicators and well-defined key terms (such as "humanitarian need," "evidence," "evidenced-based," "rapid assessment") has been noted as a clear barrier to coordination, comparability, and overall improved response*" (Darcy et al., 2013, p. 24).

The use of non-standardized surveys keeps resulting in assessments that often produce conflicting or repetitive results (Darcy et al., 2013), and hence creating the problem of assessment fatigue. In some cases *"disagreements about methodology, indicators, numbers as well as the severity of the crisis have had a paralyzing effect for both donors and involved agencies"* (ACAPS, 2016, p. 26)**.** Findings from OCHA (2009) substantiate the significant overlaps in data, insufficient amount of crucial information in the early stage of a crisis, as well as the absence of a core set of indicators to improve comparability in measuring needs.

The common perception among our informants seems to be that available standards are not always adequate to cover the field of information an organization wish to gather. The use of standards, hence depends on what information is collected, as illustrated here by informant #6 from NCA HQ:

> *"the use of standards will depend on what we wish to find out. For doing WASH-assessments, there are databases with information on what data to gather, and you can use different databases to cover your needs. So, the use of standards will depend on the context.*

As it has been pointed out that prevailing standards does not necessarily cover all the different working areas, several organizations, tend to adjust recommended methodologies, before adopting them, in order to better suit their agency, or focus of interests. According to our informants, the need for flexibility is prominent, as it cannot be assumed that standards are an "one size fits all solution".

> *"Some standardization is good, but they need to be adjusted (...) we don't develop our standards in a vacuum, they are based on the MIRA framework, but they are a separate variant based on our needs". (informant # 2, ICRC HQ).*

This is further supported by another informant who states that:

> *"The background for these standards was that people around the world should get the same aid. But they didn't reflect local, and organizational circumstances. Mostly organizations have built their individual standards around the international ones* (informant # 4, NPA HQ).

Furthermore, several informants stated that the degree of standardization possible, would highly depend on available resources. Internationally recommended procedures requires both competency and tools, which may not be available to the organization. As such, conducting assessments within the existing organizational framework, may be a more cost effective alternative.

5.1.4. Resources

Available resources are mentioned by the informants as one of the most important factors for how the information processing is conducted. Firstly, because available resources affect whether the organizations can conduct their own assessment, and how they are conducted. Additionally, all the organizations states that one of the reasons they mainly respond in areas where they are already involved, is based on the resources they have available. The findings show that most organizations conduct their own assessments, either by direct involvement from HQ-personnel, or through partner organizations, local employees, or consultants. These assessments are generally very specific for the organization's field of expertise, and therefore generates the information necessary for them to make proper decisions about their response, meaning whether and how they should get involved.

Secondly, the informants highlight the competency of the humanitarian staff as important for the degree of involvement, of organizations and representing staff, in collaborating assessments, such as joint, harmonized or sector-specific. This is confirmed by OCHA (2016, p. 7), which points to individual preferences, financial resources, and skills and experience available in the organization, as factors that affect what type of assessment is conducted. In other words, there are no universal agreement for when coordinated assessments should be conducted. Additionally, several informants stated that there is lacking knowledge of the difference between joint and coordinated assessments, which is viewed as another major challenge with cluster coordinated assessment. This lack of understanding prevents organizations and representing staff from getting involved, and may ultimately hinder the objectives of needs assessment from being met.

Thirdly, a lack of information management capacities, such as technical support, and inadequate training of cluster coordinators, is regarded as challenging when there are many actors involved in the response. This is further reinforced when workers in charge of the clusters are rotated frequently, as the individual characteristics of the cluster-lead, can have a big impact on the

continuity of engagement of actors, and the degree of information sharing within and between clusters. One of the informants highlighted this as particularly problematic, as it sometimes results in conflicting or differing information being given in the different clusters; both within the same cluster, e.g. WASH, located in different regions; and in clusters within the same region, but with different specializations.

Fourthly, the use of standards can be difficult, as it often requires competency and tools which are not available. This transmits to the quality of the information collected through assessments, as a lack of standardization of indicators and methodologies, weakens the quality and consistency of analysis.

Lastly, the problem with lack of capacity to validate and analyze available information have been underlined by several informants, who state that, *"there is a lack of analysis because of a deficiency of competent people"* (informant #6, NCA HQ). Additionally, proper analysis is found hard to achieve due to time constraints, as analyzing the amount of data available is highly time consuming.

5.1.5. Analysis

"Rather than sharing data, we should share analysis." (informant # 9, ACAPS)

ACAPS (2016) points to two main issues which may prevent an objective and impartial analysis of the humanitarian situation. The first issue is uncertainty, related to the lack of timely and precise data, the dynamic environment of the response, and pressure to make decisions quickly. The second issue, is bias related to the diversity of the humanitarian sector, as the different mandates, and sector expertise, may result in different perspectives. Which can ultimately influence how the situation, and data, is perceived and interpreted.

Several informants underline the importance of analyzing the data in accordance to the context and situation, and stresses that collection of data in large number does not automatically translate into better response. Thus, coordinated information processing could be useful, as;

> *"it's not about what you find, but how you analyze it, and how you use your findings to see both the short-term and long-term solutions. Two heads are better than one!"* (informant # 4, NPA).

On one hand, several of our informant point to the problem of assessment fatigue, where the same areas and populations are assessed over and over again, by numerous organizations. On the other hand, they also raise the issue of under-assessment, where some populations are either not properly assessed, or not assessed at all. As a result, they receive less assistance, even though they might be more severely affected.

Additionally, the findings show that the lack of standardized methodologies for collecting and analyzing data, and lack of collaboration in conducting needs assessments, makes transferring information or data, cumbersome and unfavorable. *"If we had standards, we would use less time interpreting the information"* (informant # 7, NCA field). This was substantiated by another informant, who stated that the lack of collaboration in some cases has resulted in differentiating, or even contradictory, results of needs assessments.

> *"Once, the results of OCHA-lead assessments were completely different from UNHCR-assessments. The core of the assessments are based on different outlooks, depending on whether they're assessing IDPs or refugees, but in the end, the prevailing needs are the same. There are separations that do not make sense in practice"* (informant # 6, NCA HQ).

This illustrates how biases, related to mandate or field of specialization, can influence how the data is interpreted, and thereby also what image is created of the situation, and what decisions are made. Darcy et al. (2013) highlights the potential for coordinated assessments in ensuring an inter-sectoral analysis, greater consistency in results, and avoiding agency biases, which can ultimately lead to better decision-making and planning.

The empirical findings show that the problems related to analysis of data is considered highly important for the practice of information processing, but although the problems are recognized, they are viewed as very difficult to solve due to the context. One informant states that:

> *"There is a lack of time, because we are constantly moving from one crisis to another, prioritizing all the time, and focusing on saving lives. And then we're not good enough at setting that analysis-part in motion"* (informant #6, NCA HQ)

However, the informant also admits that:

> *"The system is full of practitioners, do'ers, and there's a lack of reflectors. (There is a…) deficiency of those that are good at analysis. And we need evidence and analysis to improve" (informant #6, NCA HQ)*

The underlying factors for the weak practice of analyzing has been identified as a problem of staffing, training, and systems, for collecting data. These factors could be traced back to a systemic problem of under-investment, but research and studies rather suggest that they are a result of too many agencies advocating their own organizational agendas, by insisting to conduct individual assessments (Walker & Pepper, 2007, p. 15).

5.2. Ideals vs actual practices

As the empirical findings in section 5.1 show, the actual practices in needs assessment and information sharing, deviates from the stated ideals. Even though the humanitarian principles strongly shape the humanitarian environment, other key factors were highlighted as equally important by the informants. The reasons for this difference can be understood as a result of both organizational competition and donor policies. This section will therefore firstly elaborate on the informants own perception of the ideals of the humanitarian principles, and the importance of these in their organizations work with other humanitarian actors. Secondly, the role of competition and donors will be described, in an effort to explain the relation between ideal and actual practices in assessments.

5.2.1. Humanitarian principles

The role of humanitarian principles was remarked in connection to several topics by our informants, and their reference can be found in different policy papers, statements of organizational *visions,* and individual guidelines for procedure. Firstly, principles were highlighted for their impact on organizational mandates. For example, one informant from ICRC states that their mandate builds on the principle of *Do No Harm,* and stresses the role information processing has for the response.

Secondly, they were especially mentioned as a basis for needs assessments, as the ability to provide needs based aid, rests on the system's ability to assess these needs, in an accurate and appropriate manner. Similarly, the informants expressed a perceived importance of coordinated assessments in particular, and coordinating mechanisms in general. Among the ones who highlight the benefits of coordinated assessments is the informant from NPA, who states that *"most of us (aid agencies) try to engage in coordinated assessments (…) and try to coordinate our actions as far as possible",* maintaining that this raises both the efficiency and accountability of the response. In extension, some informant also underlines the current hype regarding harmonized assessments, stressing that humanitarian community acknowledges the importance of a comprehensive situational awareness. Another informant, particularly referred to the CORE humanitarian standards, which states that humanitarian response should be coordinated and complementary.

Lastly, the principles were also mentioned when asked about the value of standardized assessments, as all informants stated that they do see potential benefits, despite the organizational adjustments they undertake in reality. Standardization is stated as important, as it is meant to work as a common framework, ensuring that those who need aid receives it, and that everyone shall receive the same help regardless of which organization delivers it. It is therefore considered important in terms of upholding the humanitarian principles, by ensuring that aid is given on a neutral and impartial basis.

5.2.2 Organizational environments

Competition as a part of the organizational environment, is considered as a key factor when discussing collaboration in the humanitarian sector. As mentioned in sub chapter 5.2.1, unwillingness to share information has also been reasoned with competition. In a competitive environment, information is regarded as a vital resource, and some informants underline that information may be withheld based on the fear of losing vital access. The issues of competition and lack of trust among NGOs was also remarked when discussing the use of existing needs assessments. Only a few informants revealed positive experiences or practice for using existing assessments. Despite stating that they aim to engage in coordinated activities, and underlining the importance of collaborative assessments, our informants express a strong urge to conduct their own needs assessments, regardless of existing documentation, or ongoing assessments. As substantiated by one informant, informal practices therefore become important for gaining

information. The informant further explains that building trust and personal networks, is essential *"to get on the inside"* (informant # 4, NPA field).

The findings also reveal that few organizations actively engage in initiatives or procedures aiming to improve the situation. Even though the benefits of standardization has been highlighted by nearly all informants, few organizations adopt and use these unaltered. Furthermore, few informants confirmed the existence of any formal organizational guidelines stating the importance of information sharing. Some informants did however refer to ethical guidelines, applicable to the humanitarian sector as whole. Similarly, the issue of assessment fatigue was underlined by several informants, but few stated any concrete organizational efforts to ease the problem. Rather, they all stress the importance of individual practices.

A funding gap

There is a well-documented gap between available humanitarian funding, and the amount requested for covering prevailing suffering (Geoffroy et al., 2015; Grand Bargain, 2016; Walker & Pepper, 2007; Global humanitarian assistance, 2015). This mismatch creates a strong pressure on donors to prioritize where funding is allocated. In extension, is also creates a strong organizational pressure to demonstrate the need for funding for given emergencies, sectors, and projects. Although there is little doubt that an emergency famine, natural disaster, or armed conflict, necessitates international assistance and thereby financial distribution, deciding which organization should get funding is no easy task. As the available funding is limited, and largely allocated by the same donors, a strong sense of competition arises between different organizations.

The informants maintain that needs assessments are used for answering questions such as; should we intervene, what can we contribute, and how should we design our response plan. Nonetheless, the informants confirm that needs assessments are also vital tool for obtaining funding, as illustrated by the following statement.

> *"There is a correlation between how good your needs assessment is, and how much funding you get. If your need assessment isn't good, and you can't demonstrate how your proposed response will fit into the rest of the response, you won't get the donors on your side"* (informant # 1, NRC).

Need assessment can hence be understood as a tool for simultaneously achieving two different goals. On the one hand, they are important for designing the response, but they are also necessary for obtaining funding. Without the backing of donors, there can be no response to initiate. Humanitarian donors can therefore be said to hold a great deal of power over the humanitarian assistance, and thereby also a key role when considering the practice of needs assessments.

> *"Decisions are made on many other motivations than evidence; institutional self-interest, politics, operational constraints – that have nothing to do with the needs of the population. (...) Needs assessments, essentially, is a 'nice to', not a 'need to', for humanitarian organizations, because of the upward accountability and the mandate driven nature"* (informant # 9, ACAPS).

The donor

The donors tend to have long lists of demands which the organizations must meet in order to attain funding, and to prove that it is used in a matter which the donor approves of. One informant states: "*donors need to make tougher choices, they need better evidence*" (informant # 9, ACAPS). Needs assessments are thus used to document the need for aid, and substantiate the organizations plea for funding. However, the informant from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) firmly states that:

> *"Trust in the individual organizations is more important, this (trust) has been built over many years. So if they state that there is a need, they will likely receive the funding"* (informant #11, MFA)

Stating the great power that the donors hold in shaping the way organizations work, both individually, but particularly together, some informants appeal that the donors takes more responsibility in demanding collaboration. As of now, needs assessments are necessary for obtaining funding. This, combined with the funding gap and correlating competition among agencies, reduces the incentive for collaborating on assessments, or sharing all the data collected. One informant states that as the assessments are used to obtain funding, few organizations are willing to share them in their entirety, as they fear other organizations may use it as their own.

> *"If you don't have an assessment, you don't really stand a chance. (...) have experienced that an organization has taken another organization's assessment, switched the logo, and used it as their own"* (informant #6, NCA HQ)

Similarly, humanitarian organizations, humanitarian donors have their own agendas to demonstrate. In addition to allocating funding, our informants also state that donors can place restrictions on whom to collaborate with, based on these agendas. The informants especially problematize the donor's own political stance with regards to local authorities in the affected area. In many countries, these authorities may not be democratically chosen or regarded as legitimate by the international community, and many donors therefore do not wish to be associated with specific groups, and could therefore decline a needs assessment suggesting to collaborate with for instance Hamas, Al Shabaab or Al Qaida. For humanitarian actors this can become problematic, as their function is to provide aid to civilians, based on their prevailing needs, and regardless of their political leadership.

Additionally, as many donors are national governments, the political stance often changes between election terms, to differing foreign policy agendas. One government may value the field of education, while another government may wish to focus on gender equality. As such, key political preferences affect their prioritizations, and organizations need to take these changes into account for their work.

> *"The last government focused on climate, this government is more concerned with education. (...) We provide funding, and policy signals, and make demands"* (informant #11, MFA

The current practice, where there are legal contracts binding the organization and the donors, has be mentioned by several informants. They remark that this creates an atmosphere of strong upwards accountability. In extension, one informant states: "*who then becomes the duty-bearer? In a way it's the donors*" (informant #6, NCA HQ).

6. Discussion

This chapter aims to answer the research problem: *How does current needs assessment practices facilitate information-sharing among humanitarian actors?* This is attempted through answering the research questions, based on a continuous discussion of empirical findings in light of the theoretical framework presented in chapter 3.

6.1 How is the information processing among humanitarian actors?

6.1.1. Voluntary involvement

The humanitarian system as we know it today, is a result of a historic development, where organizations were established as voluntary autonomous initiatives. As substantiated by the empirical findings, there is still little overall authority to restrict, or systematically guide, the work of humanitarian organizations. Moreover, involvement in any initiative to help coordination, collaboration, or efficiency of the response, is based on the principle of voluntarism.

Even though, humanitarian organizations can be regarded as working within a *space of possibilities,* as understood by Rasmussen, there is an apparent lack of authority to set boundaries of acceptable performance. Furthermore, this space of possibilities is formulated vaguely, where expectations of results are unclear, roles and responsibilities are imprecise, and the goals are ambiguous, which can allow for latent conditions to occur (Turner, 1976). Although, there prevails an expectation to engage in coordinated activities, there are no formal contracts or regulation to ensure this. Vaguely formulated goals and expectations can be illustrated by the minimum commitment of cluster coordination. For instance, there is no clear definition of what counts as *optimal and strategic use of available resources.* There is also no authority to ensure that information is shared. In extension, there is no consequence for withholding information, or refusing to engage in coordinated activities in general. Grounded in their own practices, agendas and motives, different organizations can argue that their approach is an optimal use of available resources.

As no single, or, even multiple agencies, are in a position to oversee applied rules or regulations, combined with vague and unclear formulation of goals and expectations, the humanitarian

space of possibilities allows for all sorts of different practices to coexist. It can therefore be argued, that these factors create a situation where the space of possibilities is too large, and the system can be regarded as too flexible. As a result, various opinions, interpretations, and situational awareness occur simultaneously, laying a foundation for latent conditions, as presented by Turner (1976).

6.1.2. Organizational Agenda

The empirical findings show a clear link between organizational agendas, and information processing among humanitarian actors. One the one hand, a humanitarian response is structured by different specializations, acknowledging that the situation at hand is too complex for a single agency, and aiming to increase the efficiency of the response. On the other hand, these different specializations contain several different NGOs, all with their own sets of subcultures, focus and agendas. Individual mandates and organizational agendas, represent what Turner (1976) refers to as institutional rigidities of belief and perception. In turn this can affect what is perceived as valuable information among the different actors, as well as the perceived importance of engaging in collaborative initiatives. Hence, these beliefs and perceptions may lead to a restricted or limited situational awareness (Turner, 1976). As it should be equally important for an organization working with health, to possess and seek information about water, sanitation and hygiene, and nutrition, as this knowledge directly affects their field of work.

Given the dynamic and complex nature of humanitarian response, the need to reduce or handle uncertainty, becomes vital for their ability to provide humanitarian assistance. The humanitarian system's solution is to opt for a division of labour, through a highly specialized approach, resulting in what Turner understands as collective simplification of assumptions about the environment, producing a framework of 'bounded rationality' (Simon, 1957). This is illustrated by the empirical findings, stating that most organizations insist on conducting their own needs assessments. NGOs argue that they need to base their response on assessments that specifically targets their area of expertise, and individual assessments are therefore regarded as a necessity.

The complexity of the situation doesn't allow one actor or party to possess all relevant information, at the same time decisions needs to be taken continuously. The time-frame of operation, combined with the complexity of the emergency response itself, makes information handling inherently difficult (Wohlstetter, 1962). Combined with the specialized-structure of

the response system, and the individual organizational agendas, erroneous assumptions, about who is handling what portion of the problem, is likely to occur (Turner, 1976). This is illustrated by the following statement:

> *"Once, the results of OCHA-lead assessments were completely different from UNHCR-assessments. The core of the assessments is based on different outlooks, depending on whether they're assessing IDPs or refugees, but in the end, the prevailing needs are the same. There are separations that do not make sense in practice"* (informant # 6, NCA HQ)

6.1.3. Silos

Clusters

The cluster approach, aiming to cover different areas of an response, and thereby providing effective and timely aid, can be understood as a means of managing a task that has grown to unmanageable size, where parts of that task is passed on to other organizations, or tasks shrink to match available resources (Hirsch, 1975; Meier, 1965). Despite of the original intentions, the difficulties in handling information is evident, especially when regarding inter-cluster coordination and information sharing. Empirical findings point to a lacking information flow between clusters, which in turn can be regarded as a result of *bounded rationality.* Where information stated by one cluster can be different, or even contradictory, to information stated by another cluster. This can be attributed to the information handling difficulties, which can occur when several, or very large organizations, handle information. As they will generate a large number of messages, making the information handling further difficult (Turner, 1976). Reviewing this in light of Rasmussen (1997), who highlights the importance of both horizontal and vertical information flow to avoid the formation of latent conditions, it could be argued that the information handling between clusters is not only inadequate but actively contributing to silo mentality, and ultimately the formation of latent conditions for failures (Turner, 1976).

Standardization

The empirical findings show that standards and methodologies are adopted on an ad-hoc basis, as the *space of possibilities* leaves the humanitarian actors to choose for themselves, in which degree they wish to follow, or disregard, recommended standardization. Following standards is

either perceived as cumbersome due to restricted resources, or disregarded due to organizational interest and focus. The attitude towards common standardization, although verbally positive, in practical terms leans towards an aversion of compliance, or discrediting existing regulations (Turner, 1976. It can be argued that needs assessment, to a larger extent should be regarded as an internal policy document for humanitarian actors, where individual standards and processes represent a cost-effective and time-effective solution for different organizations.

These challenges, combined with a strong insistence to conduct agency-specific assessments, in turn creates a situation where different actors hold fragmented pieces of information (Turner, 1976), leaving no-one with a whole picture of prevailing needs.

6.1.4. Resources

In situations such as a humanitarian emergency, complexity and uncertainty are high, while resources as time, money, and energy, are scarce. This entails that the amount of information which is possible to attend to with available resources, is considerably less, than the amount needed to generate a full description, or take account of the complexity of the situation (Turner, 1976). This is further reinforced by the agencies insistence to conduct individual assessments, which is reasoned on the basis that they need to collect, and interpret, information suiting their own focus, agenda, and donor requirement. However, their unwillingness to build their response on external assessments, can also be understood as an issue of competition among actors.

The persistent confusion regarding when to conduct a certain type of assessments, and in understanding the potential benefits and value of different types of assessments, is strongly linked to lack of competency among the staff. Both the practical and formal competencies are vital for the actor's ability to understand the situation, as well as to identify and reduce vulnerabilities (Rasmussen, 1997; Kruke & Olsen, 2011). In accordance with Jacobsen & Thorsvik (2013), available competency is regarded as a vital factor for determining organizational choice of procedures. In an attempt to conduct their tasks in a cost-effective manner, organizations may perceive collaborated assessments as a less optimal option. It can be argued that, for many organizations, continuing to conduct their own assessments, by their own procedures and through their own standards, represent the lowest cost. Revisiting Turner (1997), the link between resources and decision to collaborate, can also be seen in connection

with the cost of obtaining one set of information versus the alternative. Changing assessment procedures, is costly, therefore, perception of profits and advantages must be clear to the actors.

Further, the lack of resources and competencies, can be viewed in light of information handling difficulties, as presented by Turner (1976) and Wohlstetter (1962). The heterogeneous and complex nature of a humanitarian response, makes information handling inherently difficult, and therefore requires a certain degree of resources and experience, in order to stay in control. As the empirical findings illustrate, a lack of such, in the cluster management or in the application of standards, may reinforce the already existing silo mentality.

6.1.5. Analysis

Turner (1976) confirms the importance of analysis, by stating that information can unintentionally be distorted or misleading, if not sufficiently disseminated, and collectively interpreted. This is substantiated by the empirical findings, which maintain that a collective and coordinated processing of information, which would provide a common baseline of understanding, is lacking in current practices. Factors such as independent agendas, individual assessments, and a general tendency of operating alone, creates situations where data is processed in organizational vacuums, within their respective silo-mentalities. Due to the difficulties in handling information in complex situations, Turner (1976) states that the cost of obtaining one set of information, must be weighed against obtaining an alternative set. Agency-specific assessments are a result of this, as the organizations are dependent on a certain set of information to cover their organizational demands. As a consequence, the humanitarian actors all have access to different sets of information, by which they construct their own situational awareness, and response plans. As a result of this, it can be argued that decisions are based on fragmented pieces of data, rather than holistically evidence-based knowledge of the acute situation.

Providing needs based aid in accordance with the humanitarian principles, further becomes difficult when collection and analysis of data, are contingent on organizational factors such as access, timeframes, resources, and focus of interest. As illustrated by the issues of under and over assessment, and separation of IDPs and refugees, it can be argued that populations are not assessed on similar or equal grounds. Furthermore, it can be argued that information is not primarily sought out to uphold humanitarian principles, but rather on the basis of organizational motives.

Overall, current practices in information processing reflects an attitude towards giving low priority, and not perceiving existing danger signs, which may, as Turner (1976) states, lead to the accumulation of events unnoticed or misunderstood because of a reluctance to fear the worst outcome.

6.2. Duality - Ideal and actual practice

Empirical findings, and the accompanied discussion in the previous section indicates a duality in the way humanitarian actors talk and act. The following section aims to consider this duality in light of the theoretical framework of Nils Brunsson (1993) and Jacobsen and Thorsvik (2006).

6.2.1. Humanitarian principles

Brunsson (2006) underlines the importance of legitimacy for the survival of an organization. In his view, legitimacy is gained through meeting demands from their respective environments. This is reflected through the structures, processes and ideologies, organizations exhibit to the outside world.

Humanitarian principles, which are meant to form and guide the work of humanitarian actors, can in light of the empirical findings, be viewed as one of the humanitarian system's instrumental means for obtaining legitimacy. This is apparent by their role in organizational mandates and international ethical standards, in addition to the actors' verbal declaration. In accordance with Brunsson (1993), humanitarian principles can hence be regarded as important *institutional norms,* aiming to increase effectivity, by demanding a certain type of behavior from the organizations.

The informant's verbal appreciation of standardization, coordinated assessments, as well as importance of holistic situational awareness, is consistently based on the argument that these are important in order to uphold humanitarian principles. Yet, in practical terms, they all refer to challenges and obstacles to engage in coordinated activities, based on contextual issues. Furthermore, they argue that recommended standards needs adjusting, that coordinated assessments can not replace individual assessments, that strong analysis is difficult to achieve due to resource constraints, and that a lack of authority to regulate entails that any participation

is voluntary. Based on these statements on one hand, and the affirmed importance of the principles on the other, it can be argued that organizations operate with a distinctive duality.

For many organizations, institutional norms hence, do not necessarily increase effectivity. However, they still need to express and show a degree of adherence to them in order to maintain their legitimacy. Arguably, many organizations develop two sets of structures, processes and ideologies, respective for their internal and external surroundings. For example, organizations state that they acknowledge the importance of coordination, that they do in fact base decisions on needs assessment, and that they do regard information sharing as important. However, the empirical findings underline a substantial difference between *talk* and their practical actions. In accordance with Brunsson (1993) this reflects a separation between organizational *talk* and *action,* necessitated by the perceived mismatch between their institutional norms, and internal perceptions of effectivity.

Organizational *talk*, can be regarded as vital for humanitarian organization for two reasons. Firstly, unlike many organizations they do not have a clear product to display to the outside world, as there is no clear way of measuring the effectiveness of humanitarian aid. Their talk, and stated adherence to humanitarian principles, thus becomes a benchmark by which effectivity, and therefore accountability, is evaluated. Secondly, their perceived legitimacy, is a vital factor for maintaining the flow of resources from donors.

6.2.2. Organizational environments

The humanitarian actors work in a highly intricate environment, and they are subsequently unable to provide their assistance to beneficiaries in a vacuum. Rather, the process of delivering aid is influenced by numerous organizational elements such as, other organizations, donors, supranational actors, initiatives, guiding principles etc.

Jacobsen and Thorsvik's (2013) understanding of the humanitarian environment can be seen in connection with Rasmussen's (1997) understanding of *space of possibilities, work system constraint* and *boundaries of acceptable performance.* Where the *domain*, which includes donors, beneficiaries and competing organizations, can be viewed as factors in their *work system constraints*, which according to the humanitarian actors directly impacts their work, through funding, competition and accountability, as shown in the the empirical findings. Further the *national conditions*, which includes political incentives given by governmental donors, can

be associated with *work system constraints*, as they often require humanitarian actors to adjust their programs according to political focuses, and foreign policy agendas. The *international conditions* constitute of supranational initiatives, guidelines and discourses, and can be represented by for instance The Grand Bargain initiative, Sphere project, and the MIRA framework, which are meant to guide the work of humanitarian actors, and can therefore be understood as an effort to implement *boundaries of acceptable performance*. Engagement and adherence to these are considered important, and organizations continue to advocate for their benefits. Moreover, it is expected that such initiatives are followed by humanitarian actors, both from within the community, but also from the outside civil society. The big caveat here is, the voluntary driven nature of humanitarian work. There is therefore no one to impose engagement in initiatives aiming at improving the humanitarian response, or other initiatives which can be viewed as efforts to impose *boundaries of acceptable performance*.

Donors

The empirical findings show that donors have a greater role in humanitarian aid, than ideally perceived. Revisiting the technical settings (Jacobsen & Thorsvik, 2013), the donors are vital for ensuring funding, and thus providing the financial basis for organizational existence. Additionally, the financial basis is limited, and causes a highly competitive environment, where obtaining funding becomes integral to an organization's work. Although not verbally given much importance by the humanitarian actors, in reality, existing practices for needs assessments and information sharing, are closely linked to the funding gap. When applying an organizational framework, it can be argued that it is due to this gap, factors such as competition and uncertainty are amplified. It can further be argued that this funding gap reinforces the need for an "agency first" policy, where withholding information and conducting individual assessments becomes imperative for keeping their income.

This is strongly illustrated by the purpose of needs assessments as understood by the informants. Several informants maintain that a needs assessment, is solely the first part of a response. Whether or not they receive funding for acting on such an assessments, depends on the donor's willingness to fund the specific response. This decision often takes place outside of organizational control, and is contingent on the donor's focus of interest, political stand or ideological belief.

The role of donors brings new dimensions to the discussion of accountability in humanitarian aid. Accountability, as stated in ethical standards such as principles and mandates, both for individual NGOs as well UN-agencies and the cluster approach, is aimed at the beneficiaries. Nonetheless, the only form of formal legal contracts existing in the humanitarian world, regulate the relationships between organizations and their respective donors. The actual accountability can therefore be argued to exist upwards to the donors, rather than downwards to the crisis-affected populations.

The organizations are dependent on being perceived in accordance with the values and norms expected by them, in accordance with Jacobsen and Thorsvik's (2013) presentation of institutional settings. By showing adherence to universally accepted principles and frameworks for humanitarian assistance, organizations strive to gain legitimacy by their environments. The upward accountability, entails that it is the donors who needs to be convinced, of their efficiency and accountability, rather than the humanitarian beneficiaries.

Holding legitimacy can thus be regarded as an important factor when competing for funding. The empirical findings show different organizational approaches to gaining legitimacy. These are however strongly linked to the different channels obtaining funding. For organizations dependent on a few numbers of large donors, their demonstration of adherence, and implementation of humanitarian principles becomes even more important for gaining legitimacy. The practice of needs assessments, can therefore be seen as a way of demonstrating legitimacy. It is apparent that organizations regard international ethical guidelines as important for their work. However, they seem to be of a higher importance for their donors, rather than beneficiaries. Incorporating humanitarian principles can hence be understood as important for gaining legitimacy by their donors, and thereby for receiving funding.

Humanitarian hypocrisy - an existential necessity

In order to establish a hypocrisy as understood by Brunsson (1993), two sets of ideologies, processes and structures, in other words, a duality must be identified. The empirical findings indicate several such deviations between talk and action.

For instance, there appears to be a strong insistence for claiming that humanitarian decisions are in fact based on needs assessment. This is only partially true, as decisions are based on several other factors. The nature of the crisis, available resources, organizational agendas,

political agendas, all contribute to a decision regarding humanitarian assistance. Nonetheless, humanitarian principles dictate that prevailing needs alone, should serve as the basis of humanitarianism. As discussed in subchapter 6.2.1, humanitarian principles can be regarded as *institutional norms,* which demand that action is carried out in accordance with ethical guidelines. Hence, it becomes important to proclaim the function and purpose of needs assessment as a tool for upholding these principles.

Furthermore, it seems paradoxical that while affirming the numerous benefits of standardization, none of the informants apply these unaltered. Despite a clear awareness of the fact that common indicators, baselines, and terminologies, could contribute to overall efficiency, and accountability, agency specific standards continue to be used.

Additionally, while information sharing is regarded as important, there are given a number of reasons why this is difficult to achieve in reality. This reasons can be broken down to organizational self-interest, and not the overall interest of the system as whole.

This thesis does not wish to place blame, or hold any one party responsible for shortcomings, however, it does to wish to offer an explanation of why humanitarian actors act in the way they do. The backdrop of Brunsson (1993), suggest one such explanation. It can be argued that humanitarian organizations, primarily are utility maximizing organizations, preoccupied with the same concerns as other corporate organization; survival. Their main focus is to continue to deliver humanitarian assistance, and therefore, their most important task is acquiring funding, in order to secure their survival. However, their complex environmental elements, combined with the absence of a clear, measurable product to display, creates a unique pressure on the organizations.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis is to answer the following research problem: *how does current practices in needs assessment facilitate information sharing among humanitarian actors?* To answer the research problem, a qualitative study has been conducted, using an abductive approach. The empirical findings are seen in connection to the theoretical stance, which includes both traditional safety science, and modern organizational theory. This chapter presents main findings drawn from the discussion of each research questions, and cumulatively provides a conclusion of our research problem.

How is the information processing among humanitarian actors?

Based on the presumption that information processing entails the practice of collection, analyzing and sharing information, this thesis firstly explores the practices of conducting needs assessments. The empirical findings show that the information processing in humanitarian organizations, is highly individual to the organizations. The lack of authority to regulate, the presence of differing agendas, a strong sense of compartmentalization, scarcity of resources, and lack of overall analysis, allows for several ad-hoc practices to coexist.

Despite an agreement of the importance of information sharing, current practices are continued in accordance with individual organizational agendas and focuses. The empirical findings further suggest that an improvement of these practices are given a less priority, and suffer at the expense of organizational self-interest. Differentiating mandates and specialization reaffirm the fragmentation of the humanitarian system as whole, and pose challenging to collaborative, and coordinated, activities.

Empirical findings also conclude that analysis is a weak link in information processing. As a result of reluctance to use international standards, the practice of needs assessment continues to based on different baselines, indicators and terminology. Analysis is thereby made difficult, as comparison of data, and a collective interpretation, is cumbersome, costly and time consuming. While some informants appeal for stronger analysis, the value of a holistic situational awareness, can be considered as lacking in the humanitarian community.

What is the relation between ideal and actual practices in assessments?

The empirical findings suggest a distinctive deviation between ideal and actual practice in information processing. Although verbally appreciative of the ideals in assessments, reflecting the humanitarian principles, actual practices draw in the opposite direction. Empirical evidence conclude that aid is rarely provided on the basis of needs alone. There are several other factors affecting where, and to whom assistance is given. Discussed with the backdrop of organizational theory, this thesis conclude that organizational environments are important factors for explaining the duality in practices of needs assessment. Humanitarian actors are simultaneously met with contradictory norms, expecting them to both uphold ethical principles, as well as competing for scarce resources.

Main conclusion

It can be argued that a system characterized by lacking leadership, based on a voluntary approach, containing numerous actors, and suffering from a substantial funding gap, creates the need for maintaining different sets of ideologies, structures and norms. However, this thesis argues that the systemic issues cannot exclusively be held responsible for current shortcomings. The empirical findings does suggest an organizational unwillingness to change, driven by organizational agendas, and self-interest.

Furthermore, empirical findings show clear signs of an organizational hypocrisy, where needs assessment are verbally claimed to be a foundation for decision-making. However, they serve a far greater role in obtaining funding, and decisions about humanitarian response is based on several other factors. Substantiating previous research, this thesis concludes that humanitarian aid is rarely provided on the basis of needs alone, as humanitarian principles would entail.

As a result of different organizational outlooks, assessments are highly subjective, illustrated by the persistent difference in formats and methodologies. Given the design of current practices, and the will to continue these, this thesis concludes that from the organizations' point of view, needs assessment are not meant to facilitate information sharing. The actual role of needs assessments serves a purpose as internal policy documents, instrumental to gaining funding, rather than an evidential basis for objective humanitarian needs. Their role in facilitating information sharing is therefore weak, as they are not meant to be used cross-sectorial, or inter-organizationally.

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Appendix A – INTERVIEW GUIDE

Organization:	Date:
Background:	Age:
Position / role:	Gender:

TOPICS:

- How does your organization conduct needs assessment?
    - By whom is it conducted
    - Characteristics
    - Standardization
- What is the strategic basis (formal practice) for:
    - Collaboration
    - Information-sharing
        - Guidelines
        - Authority
        - Challenges
- How are needs assessment results shared:
    - Formally/Informally
    - Decision-making authority
        - Do you use external needs assessments?
        - How do you assess the quality
        - What are guidelines
        - Experiences
        - Benefits
        - Challenges
- How are needs assessments used?
    - What is the significance
    - What other factors are important

QUESTIONS:

How does your organization conduct needs assessment?
1) Are the NA conducted internally or by the help of external experts?
2) Is there a specified team that conducts NA?
3) What are the main focuses of the NA?
4) Does your organization use international standards for NA?
    a) Do you adhere to agreed collection methodologies set by the sector / cluster?
5) In your opinion, do international standards strengthen the quality of NA?

What is the strategic basis (formal practice) for collaboration and information-sharing
1) Is there a formalized practice for sharing information with other organizations? If so, how does this take place?

a) Do you experience any discrepancies between the strategic guidelines and actual practice?
2) Who has the authority to share information and NA-results in your organization?
   a) Is this process formalized in organizational guidelines?
3) Have you experienced any challenges with regards to the strategic framework or guidelines?

How are needs assessment data shared: *(information sharing)*
1) What is your view on information-sharing between organizations?
   a) Is there a distinction between NGOs and UN-agencies in regards to information-sharing?
2) How is information-sharing conducted within the clusters/sectors?
3) What is your experience with information-sharing between clusters/sectors?
4) What is your experience with information-sharing outside of clusters/sectors?
5) How does your organization use needs assessments conducted by other aid organizations?
   a) Do they play a role in internal project planning and/or implementation?
   b) Are they used as a basis for your own needs assessments?
6) How do you assess the quality of needs assessments conducted by other organizations?
   a) Are there any persistent strengths or weaknesses in those assessments (thematic, methodological)?
7) What are your experiences with information-sharing of needs assessments?
   a) Have you experienced that other organizations have asked for your needs assessments?
   b) Have you experienced that you or your organization has sought out other organizations needs assessments?
8) Have you experienced any challenges with regards to information-sharing among the humanitarian organizations?
   a) Strategic vs practical/real-life?
   b) Challenges with getting information from others?
   c) Challenges in sharing with others?
9) In case organizations are reluctant to share information, what do you think is the reason for this?

How are needs assessments used?
1) What is the significance of NA in decision-making, in your organization?
2) What other factors form the basis for decision-making?
3) What are some other key factors that affect the design of the response?

Appendix B – LIST OF INFORMANTS

#	Organization	Headquarter	Field
1	Norwegian Refugee Council		1
2	Norwegian Red Cross	1	
3	Norwegian Red Cross		1
4	Norwegian People's Aid	1	
5	Norwegian People's Aid		1
6	Norwegian Church Aid	1	
7	Norwegian Church Aid		1
8	Médecins Sans Frontières		1
9	ACAPS	1	
10	NORCAP		1
11	Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs	1	
	Total	**5**	**6**

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) provides support to refugees, internally displaced, returnees and other people affected by displacement (NRC, 2017). NRC's main activity is providing humanitarian assistance within the specialized sectors of; camp management (CM), education, food security, information, counselling and legal assistance (ICLA), shelter, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) (NRC, 2017). NRCs standby rosters, **NORCAP,** is the world's most used expert deployment capacity. By deploying experts and bringing actors together, building preparedness and resilience, developing national and local capacity and systems, and strengthen coordination, it aims to strengthen international and local capacity to prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from crises (NRC, 2017).

Norwegian National Red Cross and Red Crescent Society (ICRC) was established in 1865, as one of the first national societies in the Red Cross Movement (Røde Kors, 2017). In humanitarian engagement internationally, they operate exclusively through the International Red Cross and Red Crescent (RCRC) Movement (Norwegian Red Cross, 2015). Their

international work focused on several areas, including health services and medical relief aid, water and sanitation, and reconstruction (Røde Kors, 2017).

Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) is a membership-based organisation working in Norway, and in more than 30 countries around the world. NPA's international work include, long-term development projects, mine and explosive clearance, and humanitarian action and crisis response. Depending on needs on the ground, they provide global support expertise on food security, livelihoods and protection (NPA, 2016).

Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) is a faith-based organization, with headquarters in Oslo (NCA, 2017). As an ACT Alliance member, it coordinates its activities with and seek cooperation with other members of the alliance. NCA delivers humanitarian assistance through several programs in 31 countries, and their global expertise is providing water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) (NCA, 2015).

Médecins Sans Frontière (MSF) was founded in 1971, with the *"aim of establishing an independent organization focused on delivering medical aid quickly, effectively and impartially"* (MSF, 2017). Working in 69 countries in 2015, MSF's interventions involve addressing the most urgent health needs of people in crisis, including in armed conflict, natural disasters, and endemic and epidemic disease (MSF, 2017).

ACAPS was established in 2009, as a non-profit, non-governmental project. Their mission is to *"contribute towards a shared situation awareness within the humanitarian community, thereby enabling effective, evidence-based humanitarian decision-making"*, and they do this by supporting the humanitarian community with all aspects of humanitarian needs assessments (ACAPS, 2017).

The Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (UD) is the foreign ministry of Norway. It works includes matters relating to Norway's relations with foreign powers, international organizations and Norway's assistance to developing countries. The section for Humanitarian Affairs is responsible for implementing the government's humanitarian policy and allocate funding (Regjeringen.no, s.a.).