



Knowledge management and humanitarian organisations in the Asia-Pacific: Practices, challenges, and future pathways[☆]

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ABSTRACT

While there is growing recognition amongst humanitarians that knowledge sharing and exchange are essential components of organisational efficiency and effectiveness, knowledge management processes in many humanitarian organisations are still inadequate. The review of knowledge management and international relations literature reveals limited research on the institutional memory of humanitarian organisations. This article aims to start filling this research gap by examining the use of explicit and tacit knowledge transfer in the humanitarian sector in the Asia-Pacific. It points to the embryonic stage of knowledge management and the reliance on tacit knowledge management consistent with the early stage of sector professionalization in the region. It reviews and analyses existing scholarly literature and manuals and draws on fieldwork interviews with key humanitarian personnel that primarily focus on natural hazards. The findings suggest institutional memory in the humanitarian sector remains ad hoc with limited long-term capture. There is a broad tendency in the region to rely on tacit knowledge transfer – interpersonal relationships and informal decision-making – as the dominant knowledge management practice. This reliance challenges knowledge management at the institutional level and indicates a weakness in the institutional memory of humanitarian organisations in the region. Our research raises questions about how to improve knowledge management practices within humanitarian organisations in the Asia-Pacific with significant implications for the sector more generally. A recalibration of tacit and explicit knowledge management would build institutional memory in humanitarian organisations. This requires a dual-track approach with codified documentation of experiences and greater emphasis on an institutional culture of knowledge sharing.

1. Introduction

The Asia-Pacific is the most disaster-prone region in the world. According to the United Nations Asia-Pacific Disaster Report 2017, disasters in the region affected 35 million people, resulted in 4987 lives lost, and caused \$77 billion worth of damage in 2016 [1]. Improving disaster management practices therefore should be a high priority. Humanitarian effectiveness arguably contains four characteristics: shared responsibility, demand-driven program design, predictability and flexibility, and system-wide learning and accountability [2]. This has brought into focus the importance of knowledge management in disasters, one of the four core components of humanitarian effectiveness. There is growing recognition that coordination in humanitarian operations can be enhanced through knowledge sharing and exchange. Yet there remains little attention paid to knowledge management and

institutional memory in the humanitarian sector. It has long been argued that the sector is undergoing professionalization [2] but this does not substantively extend to knowledge management and the building of institutional memory in the region. As such, this article aims to assess the current state of knowledge management in the Asia-Pacific humanitarian community, specifically looking at non-governmental and regional organisations. Frangonikolopoulos [3]:62 argued that there was very little representation of the Global South in the decision-making bodies of non-governmental organisations and this remains the same today illustrating the importance of capturing the humanitarian experience in the Asia-Pacific.

Existing studies in knowledge management and humanitarianism indicate that there is a knowledge gap that needs to be filled, one that is of societal and theoretical relevance. Knowledge is a vital resource to both individuals and organisations alike. Some scholars refer to

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knowledge as the “justified belief that increases an entity’s capacity for effective action” [4]:142 [5]; 1835). An amalgamation of experience, technical information, and personal insights, knowledge enables better and faster decision-making at both the individual and organisational level [6], which is particularly acute in humanitarian settings. The literature on knowledge management largely focuses on the private and public sectors but is limited when it comes to the humanitarian community. Attempts at assessing institutional memory in a humanitarian context have been limited to the reproduction of Executive Committee meetings minutes [7], or analysis of one or two large organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) [7,8]. Arguably, this indicates an absence of systematic development of institutional memory research in the sector. Moreover, there are many challenges to bringing together different disciplines.

This article seeks to contribute to the domain of knowledge management in this way. First, we examine challenges faced within humanitarian organisations on knowledge management. In doing so, we start by examining the parameters of the field and how it applies to the humanitarian community. We then identify the main factors researchers have found affecting knowledge transfer and the development of institutional memory in humanitarian organisations. As we apply these factors to knowledge transfer in humanitarian work, we argue that a more nuanced approach to building institutional memory in humanitarian organisations in the Asia-Pacific to address this gap is needed. Finally, this article also contributes to inter-disciplinary inquiry, insofar as to demonstrate the linkages between knowledge management and institutional memory.

2. Literature review

2.1. Importance of knowledge management for organisations

In essence, knowledge management is defined as the process of creating, capturing, codifying, storing, sharing, distributing and effectively using knowledge within an organisation [6,9]:1450003–1 [10]; 103 [5]; 1835). Good knowledge management allow organisations to learn from mistakes and successes from past operations and events. It also prevents organisations from losing key knowledge components such as technical know-how, operational standards and best practices. In this context, a key enabler of knowledge management is a Knowledge Management System (KMS), which is designed and developed to help people to identify, share, retrieve and use knowledge [10,11]:103). The significant interest shown in KMS coincides with technological advancements that enable large amounts of information and data to be processed, stored and disseminated.

From an International Relations perspective, the way an organisation manages its knowledge has vast implications on that organisation’s institutional memory. According to Corbett, Grube, Lovell and Scott [12]:556), there has always been an assumption that institutional memory is static in nature and that knowledge should be explicitly codified and archived centrally within an institution. However, they argue that organisations should adopt a more “dynamic, people-centred conceptualisation that sees institutional memory as a composite of intersubjective memories open to change”, one that moves away from the use of “static repositories of summative documents holding a single objective memory” [12]:556). While the assumption is that centrally archived knowledge is a top-down process with limited applicability in different contexts, and that current institutional practices are much more ‘dynamic,’ there will likely be a need to recalibrate these two. On one side there is a need for a central repository that can withstand the test of time and high staff turnover, on the other there is a need to make the collection of this knowledge transferable which is dependent upon the time and place it is collected. This is particularly important in the humanitarian field in the Asia-Pacific where there is a diverse number of languages and practices used in the region.

While knowledge management initiatives might not necessarily utilise information technology solutions, most of the literature defines modern KMS as IT-based systems [5]:1835 [9]; 1450003–2). They can include any one or combination of “knowledge-based systems, document management systems, semantic networks, object oriented and relational databases, decision support systems (DSS), expert systems, and simulation tools” [5]:1835). Scholars argue that well-established KMS in organisations should be able to (1) enhance the visibility and accessibility of knowledge, (2) help create avenues for employees to share knowledge, and (3) foster a culture of collaboration and sharing [9]:1450003–2). This helps organisations preserve organisational and institutional memory. However, when considering the field of humanitarian work, organisations have historically been characterised as illustrative of the failure of the bureaucratic model with decentralised knowledge and centralised decision-making, ignoring outside information, and a commitment to failing courses of action. An example of this bureaucratic failure was what happened in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2005 [13]: 209). While humanitarian organisations have responded to numerous crises, their ability to capture lessons learnt is stymied by the absence of a sectoral or organisational central repository to promote cross sectoral learning and so past mistakes continue to occur [14]: 6). It is therefore important for the study of humanitarian organisations to engage with the knowledge management research of a field often associated with the private sector to understand the core elements of knowledge management and its implications for institutional memory of humanitarian organisations.

2.2. Types of knowledge

The knowledge management and international relations literature generally recognises that knowledge can be categorised into two forms: (1) explicit and (2) tacit. The former refers to formalised, codified knowledge, while the latter refers to intuitive, hard-to-define knowledge that is based on personal experiences [6,15]:13 [12]; 569). Explicit knowledge is often stored in databases, memos and documents or other formal documentation. Tacit knowledge, on the other hand, is often found in the minds of members and stakeholders of the organisations [6, 15]:13 [4]; 142). Some examples of tacit knowledge include personal insights, experience, beliefs, values, soft skills and habits [16]:8 [4]; 142). Many scholars consider tacit knowledge to be one of the most important resources of an organisation, to the extent that they believe effective knowledge management strategies have to actively use tacit knowledge pools [4]:142 [17]; 50; Brand, 2008:17). However, this is not a simple undertaking. For one, tacit knowledge relies heavily on the sharing of stories and experiences [18]:235 [17]; 49 [12]; 569). As such, it is difficult to fully capture, codify and convert it into explicit knowledge and thus largely remains decentralised in the realm of inter-personal exchange.

‘Knowledge’ in disaster management can refer to disaster mitigation and response strategies, past experiences of humanitarian operations, and best practices. Knowledge management in this context therefore refers to the process of acquiring, managing, and utilising disaster information and knowledge for the support of humanitarian operations [19]:373). Even though there is a large amount of information and knowledge available in the humanitarian sector, it is owned by multiple actors, stakeholders and organisations. When disasters happen, there is an overflow of information gathered and lessons learned at the institutional and individual levels. After relief operations are completed, a large part of this information is often forgotten, lost or not transmitted to others. For humanitarian organisations, the success and efficacy of their actions are mostly measured and tested during the onset of disasters. Such adverse events do not happen daily, and in some cases, many years can pass by without their response strategies and capabilities being tested. As such, there is a need to ensure that institutional best practices are maintained outside of disaster settings.

Research on humanitarianism and knowledge use suggests that

humanitarian efforts are made more effective if there is a systematic and well-integrated system of knowledge sharing and exchange in place [11]. For instance, in a disaster setting, humanitarian organisations require specific “knowledge needs” that enable them to operate [20]:23). These can range from real-time satellite maps of an affected area, situation reports, availability and movement of relief supplies, demographic information, needs assessments, background information, and operational details [10]: 103 [11,21]; 1520).

Scholars further suggest that a failure to share information and knowledge can have an adverse impact on collective decision-making during disasters [22]:50 [23]; S51). This results in a lack of coordination and inefficiency in humanitarian operations. The misallocation of relief resources, delayed operations, and overlaps in responses are but some of the failures that could arise [22]:50). Humanitarian organisations have different strengths, limitations and areas of focus. Hence, it is imperative that their capacities are maximised. This can only occur if there is a cohesive system of information sharing and coordination.

The next section assesses some of the factors influencing knowledge transfer and exchange in the humanitarian sector. From studies, three main factors were identified: (1) staff turnover, (2) organisational culture, and (3) use of new technology/systems.

2.3. Staff turnover

The roster of staff and personnel is arguably a humanitarian organisation’s greatest and most valuable resource [24]:1). The proper management of staff turnover is therefore essential to ensure that humanitarian organisations do not lose important human capital. In a traditional sense, staff turnover can be defined as the “proportion of staff leaving in a given time period, but prior to the anticipated end of their contract” [25]:1). Increasingly so, it has also been used to refer to ‘staff rotation’, where “staff move from one contract or assignment to another” [25]:1). Studies show that high levels of unplanned and dysfunctional staff turnover can create disruptions in the operational capacities. It disrupts knowledge management processes, jeopardises continuity in terms of collaboration, and results in a loss of institutional memory [26]:96 [25]; 3 [27]; 1688). Indeed, as post-disaster evaluations of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami indicate, high staff turnover in international agencies hindered the building of institutional memory and resulted in a lack of contextual knowledge and relational networks on the ground [28]:16). Similarly, in the corporate world, knowledge management tends to fail when the team assigned to work on a project is disbanded and the team members are reassigned before they have had the opportunity to conduct debriefings [6].

Similarly, in humanitarian operations, knowledge remains with individuals before it is captured or shared in an institutional setting. If these forms of tacit knowledge are not codified in documents or manuals, they will get lost when these individuals move on to other organisations [29]. This is exacerbated by humanitarian workers being one of the most mobile employees in the world [11,27]:1688). Most of them work on a rotational mission basis, often changing appointments after two to three years [26]:96). This phenomenon can be attributed to a few factors. Firstly, humanitarian work can be very stressful. Staff rotation is thus seen to alleviate this stress by allowing personnel to alternate between tougher and easier assignments [25]:5). Rotating personnel also allows them to acquire a wide range of experience from different settings [25]:5). There have also been instances where staff members have grown disillusioned by the leadership of the organisation or are motivated to move on in search of better career prospects [25]:9). Further, short-term donor funding limits humanitarian organisations ability to offer long term career prospects to many of their staff.

Some researchers argue that high turnover rate can benefit humanitarian organisations [30]:26). The constant rotation of roles and locations arguably gives them access to more forms of heterogeneous knowledge. This might be tenable only if the organisation ensures that the tacit knowledge embodied in these individuals are stored and

codified before they leave [30]:26). Staff turnover processes therefore need to be a focus.

2.4. Organisational culture

In broad terms, organisational culture refers to the “specific collection of values and norms that are shared by people and groups in an organisation” [31]. It is an intangible and abstract concept that is usually embedded inside an organisation [32]:115). De Long and Fahey identified four key ways in which organisational culture can influence knowledge management practices: (1) culture shapes perceptions about what constitutes important knowledge, (2) culture dictates how knowledge is transferred throughout the hierarchy, (3) culture determines the degree of interaction between individuals, (4) culture determines whether or not new knowledge pools are created and adopted [32].

Research shows that successful knowledge management requires organisations to address human and cultural facets. Scholars argue that organisational culture influences behaviour and consequently determines performance [33]:465 [34]; 271 [35]; 472 [36]; 154 [4]; 141). A knowledge-centred culture facilitates good knowledge management practices within an organisation. Conversely, an insular culture has been recognised as an impediment to the implementation of knowledge management [37]:144 [32]; 113). Hence, organisations are encouraged to cultivate organisational values and norms that revolve around the continued sharing of knowledge [33]:465 [34]; 271 [35]; 472). This builds on the concept of a Community of Practice (CoPs), where members engage regularly in sharing experiences and learning in a common field [38].

Trust was also identified as a determinant of knowledge exchange within organisations. Mutual trust between co-workers enables a freer flow of knowledge within the organisation and facilitates better employee collaboration [39]:18). Some organisations attempt to develop this culture of trust by adopting a mentor/mentee system for its employees [40]:386). Mentoring is increasingly being regarded as an effective means of exchanging knowledge [40]:386 [41]; 84). Both the mentor and mentee can benefit from this exchange. Hence, it is of paramount importance to build informal relationships within a company so that the workers trust each other enough to engage in knowledge sharing practices [30]:19).

In humanitarian response, Smirl’s work [42] on everyday practices of international aid workers observes unintended or transformative effects on the affected population. The research points to the dominant top-down approaches that implement humanitarian strategies through assistance projects on to affected people. What becomes visible in the Asia-Pacific is the blend of tactics or operations combined with strategy that muddy the waters when attempting to build institutional memory. You may get strategists implementing their own plans which oftentimes makes them non-transferable or of limited impact due to budget or technical skill constraints. As Beerli argues, it is also common for the headquarters and frontline staff of a humanitarian organisation to have inconsistent practices. Frontline staff might challenge the legitimacy and relevance of top-down directives [8]:71). From the standpoint of humanitarian workers, there is also a perception problem where they see themselves solely as operational personnel rather than integral to an overarching institutional or sectoral strategy. They might be unwilling to engage in activities they view as ‘administrative’ or ‘office-related’ tasks when they see their job as being ‘in the field’ more often than transferring and exchanging knowledge. This hinders attempts to systematise or build a culture of knowledge management in humanitarian organisations to build institutional memory.

2.5. Technology/systems

Information technology has helped to break down information barriers in the humanitarian community and organisations increasingly rely

on online portals and databases to access disaster information [35]:472). Increasing the bandwidth and speed of data transfer help to facilitate the almost instantaneous access to disaster information. New emerging web 2.0 technologies open new avenues for disaster responders to share information and disseminate knowledge. For example, in 2009, when Taiwan was hit by Typhoon Morakot, humanitarian organisations heavily relied on information from online social networking and microblogging sites to coordinate relief and allocate aid resources [43]:3). Web 2.0 technologies leverage on users who actively get involved in the content creation process [44]:161). Examples of this would be Wikipedia or other online forums. This inherent trait of voluntariness exists among humanitarian organisations as well. As such, Web 2.0 technologies are well suited for knowledge transfer within and between humanitarian organisations [44]:162). However, there is still a need for personnel working in humanitarian organisations to be motivated to share knowledge through actively engaging with one another.

Private sector companies such as 3 M Corporation acknowledge that knowledge management is “more of a cultural and organisational issue than it is a technological one” [45]:17). The issue is not so much about whether there are means and tools for knowledge sharing and exchange, but rather, whether they are effectively used. While IT is an enabler of knowledge management, a culture of knowledge sharing is often more important. Indeed, a large of segment of the literature suggests that knowledge management needs to be “people-centred rather than document-centred” [46]:10). Knowledge management is seen as a “collective practice that needs to be approached from a social as well as a technical angle” [31]. The willingness to share information and knowledge must “permeate the entire fibre of the organisation” [18]:235). As such, these two elements – organisational culture and technology – should be mutually reinforcing.

2.6. Knowledge management nuances: humanitarian vs private sector

Some aspects relating to knowledge management are unique to humanitarian organisations. Research shows that there are subtle differences in motivation for knowledge sharing between the private and the humanitarian sectors. Businesses and corporations use knowledge management to gain an edge over their competitors, with the end goal of maximising profit and wealth [47]:64 [37]; 143). On the other hand, research acknowledges that knowledge sharing within and between humanitarian organisations should be undertaken to improve their overall operational capabilities and to facilitate effective coordination during disasters. For example, the sharing of accurate data pertaining to logistical needs and capacities can help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian supply chains during disasters [15]:8).

Regarding cultural determinants of knowledge exchange, the literature indicates several differences between the private and humanitarian sectors. In the private sector, employees might not want to share information with their peers as they see them as competitors [48]:182 [40]; 386). This is especially the case in organisations where knowledge sharing is perceived as a source of power amongst a privileged few, and sharing would only reduce one’s chances of being promoted [49]:56). Greed, in this case using someone else’s pool of knowledge without reciprocating, is also detrimental to effective knowledge transfer [39]:17).

Some cultural barriers to knowledge transfer and exchange are unique to humanitarian organisations. Even with developments in collaborative software technologies, knowledge exchange can only take place if those involved make a conscious effort to do so. The unwillingness to share critical information is perhaps the main impediment to knowledge sharing and coordination in the humanitarian sector. Humanitarian organisations with different agendas have little motivation to work together; furthermore, the need to compete for donor aid disincentivises the sharing of vital information and knowledge [50]. The large number of humanitarian organisations also creates divergent standards of information. Even differences in disaster management

jargon used can result in a communications gap between different humanitarian organisations [35]:469).

Some researchers have also found that while knowledge management in for-profit organisations is significantly influenced by organisational culture and management support, this might not be the case in non-profit organisations [41]:69). The value systems of personnel and staff working in these humanitarian organisations are perhaps more deterministic in the area of knowledge management [41]:83). Personnel that are more aligned with and committed to the organisation’s mission would be more motivated to further its goals [41]:83). This removes any resistance towards knowledge sharing and encourages them to be receptive to new knowledge sources. Non-profit organisations also tend to “maintain knowledge in an implicit format and share it through informal and personal contacts” which result in a low level of sharing [30]:22). To solve this problem, research suggests that tacit knowledge should be codified in “reports, success stories, or simply by creating yellow pages for indicating who knows what” [30]:22).

Is there a Need for More Robust Knowledge Management Practices in the Humanitarian Sector?

The humanitarian sector has grown in size and complexity over the past generation but is often characterised as operating in “exceptional” circumstances [51]: 1194). As such, each disaster is characterised as different and positions the sector as reactive compared to the more professionalised and systematic proactive private sector. Responding during complex and dynamic crises poses many problems for humanitarian organisations. While the use of knowledge management to support disaster responses might seem to be intuitive, it is surprising to find that implemented KMS are still few and far between in the humanitarian sector. Indeed, a review of the literature finds that while there are attempts to share and exchange knowledge, many humanitarian organisations are still entrenched in silos. This is exacerbated by the large and ever-increasing number of humanitarian organisations.

As humanitarian organisations compete for limited funding, the need to be perceived as legitimate entities becomes even greater. With growing acknowledgement of the impact of knowledge management on operational efficiency, more organisations should, in theory, be adopting KMS. This is highlighted by DiMaggio and Powell’s [52] concept of institutional isomorphism, which emphasises the importance of processes that ‘force’ organisations to adopt characteristics of others in the same environment and conditions. At the core of this theory is the idea that the desire for legitimacy constitutes a major source of convergence and conformity in organisational forms and practices. In accordance with this, robust knowledge management practices should be adopted by humanitarian organisations seeking to reinforce their legitimacy.

The threat posed by disasters requires more robust humanitarian responses from practitioners. This can only be achieved if knowledge is actively exchanged, shared and utilised between humanitarians. The question of how to foster a knowledge-sharing culture within humanitarian organisations thus becomes an important one to be addressed. Organisational rewards, such as recognition, or financial incentives are effective means to motivate employees to share knowledge [53]:13). Organisations are also encouraged to recruit personnel who have demonstrated a “positive attitude towards knowledge sharing” [53]:16). However, these solutions are perhaps more applicable in the private sector. Arguably, most humanitarian workers are not working for monetary benefit and recognition. Many humanitarian organisations also have informal recruitment processes, often relying on volunteers to make up their personnel requirements. As such, these proposed measures need to be adapted to fit the humanitarian sector.

These factors are by no means unique to the humanitarian sector; they are also important determinants of knowledge transfer in private and public organisations. However, as compared to their counterparts in the private and public sector, humanitarian organisations are still a long way off from dealing with the challenges that each of these variables

pose to successful knowledge transfer and exchange. For example, as Holzer, Kocher, Bendahan, Cardia, Mazuze and Gillet [54]:1 argue, while many humanitarian organisations use knowledge management systems, they still struggle to manage their knowledge efficiently. Our article thus contributes to an emerging conversation within the humanitarian sector and highlights the need for better management of institutional memory in humanitarian organisations intersecting the strategic and operational levels.

3. Methodology

After reviewing research studies on knowledge management in the private and non-profit sectors, we conducted a series of interviews with key personnel from humanitarian organisations. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 practitioners from 14 humanitarian organisations based in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Japan, between May and October 2018. These countries are the sites of the respective headquarters or offices of significant regional importance (a regional headquarters or large staff presence for example) of humanitarian organisations in the Asia-Pacific, particularly in Southeast Asia. All participants have vast experience providing humanitarian assistance and responding to disasters, both domestically and abroad. Some of the participants included programme managers, heads of operations, and knowledge management officers. As the status of knowledge management remains low within humanitarian organisations, often this job scope was covered by personnel with additional or primary responsibilities elsewhere within an organisation. As a result of this, we were reliant on elite interviews and the ‘snowballing’ effect to identify the individual with oversight of the knowledge management function in a humanitarian organisation.

We contacted individuals who are currently or were previously involved in the coordination of response operations, people in leadership positions, as well as people who oversee the dissemination of information and knowledge within their organisations. Interviewees consisted of a mixture of frontline staff and office personnel illustrating individual organisational structure and the absence of sectoral recognition for knowledge management as a singular job scope. The aim was to understand how humanitarian practitioners in the region transfer knowledge within their organisations, and to identify the challenges that these practitioners face when managing knowledge. The overall research question therefore was “how do humanitarian workers transfer knowledge within their organisations and sector?” The semi-structured elite interviews were conducted on a non-attributable basis, and participants were given consent forms to sign, which guarantees anonymity in line with university regulations.

After transcribing the interviews, we grouped the fieldwork findings into core themes. This was informed by our literature review of scholarly work, manuals and ‘grey’ literature (primarily organisational publications), which helped us identify important themes in knowledge management. In terms of presentation, we decided to include excerpts of our interviews in the Fieldwork Findings section. This helps to give the interviewees a voice and also highlights similar thematic elements relating to their experiences with knowledge transfer and management. As Morrow [55]:256 asserts, the “actual words of participants are essential to persuade the reader that the interpretations of the researcher are in fact grounded in the lived experiences of the participants”. This also provides more clarity and transparency in our research.

We acknowledge that there are certain limitations with our methodology, which could be addressed in future research. First, our study only examined knowledge management practices in humanitarian organisations based in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Japan. This was due to limited financial resources, time constraints but reflects the diversity of sites where humanitarian organisations have significant presence in the region. Some humanitarian organisations in the region were unresponsive to requests for participation in the study and as such is a limitation of this study. We acknowledge that the Asia-Pacific is a

region that is very culturally diverse; correspondingly, humanitarian organisations in other Asia-Pacific countries might have different organisational cultures, which could lead to further nuances in the way they operate. Hence, insights gleaned from our participants are not representative of the region but reflect the views of elite participants with specific expertise and/or job scope that covers knowledge management and have been active outside of their primary country of residence but remaining in the region. Future research can and should collect data from a larger sample from the region recognising the length of time required to reach those with this specific job scope in whole or in part.

Second, during our study, most interviews were only conducted with an individual from each organisation. His or her insights were then used to draw conclusions about the organisation’s knowledge sharing culture and practices. While we tried to interview individuals who are currently or were previously involved in the coordination of response operations, people in leadership positions, as well as people who are in charge of disseminating information and knowledge within their organisations, their viewpoints might not be representative of what the majority of workers think and reiterated the informality of knowledge management in the humanitarian sector. Future research can involve the collection of data from a larger pool of workers within an organisation. This would enable us to have a deeper understanding of knowledge management within humanitarian organisations.

4. Fieldwork findings

As mentioned above, we decided to organise our findings according to the core themes identified in our literature review, that is organisational culture (section 4.1), staff turnover (section 4.2), and use of technology and systems (section 4.3). In addition, section 4.4 explores the idea that the lack of resources might be the reason for inadequate knowledge management systems, while section 4.5 highlights the importance of using knowledge for organisational change.

4.1. Stronger informal sharing culture

We found that culture was a key determinant of an organisation’s knowledge sharing processes. Throughout the course of our study, almost all participants acknowledged the importance of capturing knowledge and sharing it. However, when it came to the actual practice of formally codifying, storing and disseminating knowledge, it was not as unanimous. Most indicated some form of weakness or inadequacy in their organisation’s knowledge sharing practices. This was in turn linked to a lack of continuity and efficiency in an organisation’s workflow, as well as a loss of institutional memory.

One participant emphasised this point

“I am one of the very few remaining of my generation, how [do] I institutionalise all my knowledge I have gained from the past 20 missions ... so we don’t have that, it has never been a norm for us to document all of these things” (Participant AA/060618/03)

The mentioning of norms ties back in with the concept of organisational culture, which as highlighted by the literature, is an important determinant of an organisation’s behaviour and practices. Based on our interviews, there seems to be a stronger informal sharing culture prevalent across humanitarian organisations in the region. A few participants shared that while they do take field notes, they do not actually convert these notes into formal reports when they are back in the office. Indeed, there seems to be a stronger informal sharing culture within many of these organisations, where information is shared over WhatsApp, through word of mouth, or at informal sharing sessions such as retreats.

“And sometimes, honestly speaking, from my experience, sometimes out of informal contacts, you get much more than formal settings” (Participant AD/020818/11)

Even in the prelude to field deployments, informal meetups and briefings between staff and volunteers are preferred. As one participant pointed out:

“Usually I’ll meet them before, so it could be a two hour session just with them, chit chat and talk, telling them, updating them about the conditions, what we are doing on the ground, ok next week we are heading there, this is what we will be doing, then if there’s any preparation work that needs to be done, I’ll get them to do it” (Participant AA/250618/05)

(i) Perception of humanitarian work

This preference for informal sharing is perhaps tied to the way humanitarian workers tend to perceive themselves. A common theme from the interviews was that the participants largely viewed themselves as purely operational entities, that is, they felt that they should not be taking notes and producing extensive reports while on the ground. Simply put, administrative tasks were viewed as troublesome endeavours, which do not fit into the more action-oriented ethos of their work.

“I think in general [humanitarian workers] agree that knowledge is important. I think the problem is not just about agreeing but actually doing it. And I understand why, because most of them are operational people, field operational people, so they don’t really take notes. I’m not trying to undermine them, they are very very good, note-taking is not in the culture of operational people. So that’s a big challenge” (Participant AB/050618/02)

It was also pointed out that humanitarian practitioners are often not trained in formal knowledge management processes:

“However, it’s really hard to expect from someone who does not have specific information to be a master of knowledge management systems, if that person is a nurse originally by education or experience, and can do fantastic programmes in areas of community health centres, but if you expect that same person to do knowledge and info management at the same time which is required if that person is a project manager or programme manager, it will be quite a stretch for him or her” (Participant AA/210818/14)

“Those people, like myself, we are all employed without proper training, without degree, without diploma, don’t talk about degree, don’t talk about doctorate My previous CEO, she’s a midwife, so to write a report, she can cry in front of you, you get what I mean?” (Participant AD/310718/06).

They have the skillsets and expertise to respond to emergencies and provide aid to vulnerable populations; however, they might not have the tools to share knowledge.

“This is something that is not common to us, talking about documentation of these things, usually for us, we are simplistic practitioners, of course, we know that we are going to move towards how we can institutionalise all these best practices. So far, we have not done too much in terms of documentation ...” (Participant AD/030818/12)

This ‘operational identity’ was echoed by others as well. One participant mentioned that the operational focus of his organisation meant that formalised mechanisms for knowledge sharing were sidelined:

“... it hasn’t been proposed in a way that is appealing to people, or that people can understand the advantages of that ... it’s really ...

operationally oriented as an organisation, rather than strategically oriented. And so, we have strategies of course, broad strategies but there’s not really that knowledge sharing in terms of transfer of lessons learnt from one person to another ... it’s not that formalised” (Participant AC/120618/04)

The same participant also gave a scathingly honest opinion of report-writing:

“I think that there’s a culture of reports ... the tendency is to write very long reports. Now generally reports ... nobody reads them. I’m sorry to say that Because if I produce a report 25, 30 pages, and then push it up to my management, the likelihood that they receive more of these type of reports is high, and then they find on their desk ten of these reports. The chances that they are going to read carefully any one of these reports is very low. So ... even if there is a lot of information there, it’s not transferred ... So one of the challenges ... is how can we transfer knowledge without reports?” (Participant AC/120618/04)

(ii) Nature of work

The nature of humanitarian work might explain the preponderance of informal sharing practices. As Boh [56] asserts, organisations that work on less routine and structured projects tend to utilise more “personalisation-oriented knowledge-sharing mechanisms”. Humanitarian work is often unstructured and non-routine. As such, there could be a greater reliance on person-to-person knowledge sharing strategies, with an emphasis on tacit knowledge.

One participant from an international humanitarian organisation elucidated this point rather poetically, comparing the gathering and sharing of knowledge in a humanitarian setting to that of a cloud atlas:

“... I use that analogy, you know it’s a, it’s like, I call it cloud atlas, just imagine that your ambition is to make, to map all the clouds in the sky above you, you can make a photo but in the next second, it will be a completely different map, so you keep chasing, keep making photo after photo and you will never end it, you will never have a map. So it’s fluctuating, it’s ever-changing, so you have to, instead of trying to map them and to make that kind of knowledge which is applicable for some other disciplines or areas or objectives, you try to understand underlying causes and effects, you know, things that are principles and trends and things that enables you to apply” (Participant AA/210818/14)

While best practices and generic response strategies act as good reference points, the unpredictability of a disaster setting often require flexibility and ad-hoc decision-making. This uncertainty surrounding knowledge needs therefore necessitates a more ad-hoc form of knowledge sharing. Instead of simply relying on codified documents and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), practitioners must rely on on-the-ground expertise, which often comes from informal chats with local staff.

As noted by one participant

“But the real truth is that, each and every response, there is no such thing as having two same responses. Even if it’s happening in the same country, it’s always different ... and you cannot simply send people that have delivered response in another country to this country and expect them to be operational from day one” (Participant AA/210818/14)

The hectic nature of humanitarian work also poses challenges when it comes to the collating of lessons learnt and key takeaways from past responses. During an emergency response, when aid workers are out in the field, they might not have the time to write reports. Even when they

are back in the office, they might fall behind in their reporting. As one participant from a locally-based humanitarian organisation indicated:

“Yes, so we have a server where ... everything goes up, all our projects and relief, all our photos, but I guess the shortcoming with that, it depends on the person itself and how much he or she, like how diligent is he in updating his project folder. So some stuff are still missing, and [someone] will come to us and [say], hey I’m looking for this this this, so I guess that’ll be a big blow when it comes to knowledge management. What we try to do, at least with the hard copies, it has to be submitted with expense reports, so there’s an incentive ... So, the person is kind of forced to do it ... we’re trying to get very systematic ... because if there are no incentives, it will just get lost and when the programme manager leaves, there’s like what, 10 field trip reports outstanding, because it’s very easy to just get very tired on the ground and stop with it” (Participant AA/280518/01)

(iii) Organisation composition and size

The size and geographical dispersion of an organisation also creates challenges for knowledge sharing. A large humanitarian organisation with a wide network and many chapters has the advantage of having multiple sources of information. However, this also means that the information and knowledge is more dispersed. Their staff might not necessarily know what forms of knowledge are available, and where to look for the knowledge, especially if there is no central database available.

“It’s really hard to navigate the matrix in our organisation in order to have functional information at hand. And then huge amounts of ... very useful information [are] collected and recorded in different other places, but it’s simply unknown to the rest of the systems, so we have fantastic libraries of specialist knowledge ... but no one else knows about it ... [s]o we literally reinvent the wheel every time we have some response. It’s sitting there, for free, it’s simply not shared” (Participant AA/210818/14)

In the course of our research, we also found that smaller humanitarian organisations, or country-level chapters, with fewer staff, often utilise a combination of both formal and informal knowledge sharing mechanisms. As this participant notes, while much sharing takes place over meals, the information is also codified in trip reports:

“[C]urrently I have three staff. So, a lot of times when we are in the field, we are in the field together. So a lot of the learning takes place there and then ... in the event that we do need to split up to cover various aspects of the work, then yes, over perhaps more casual settings when we have meals or whatnot, we will always share ... at the end of every trip, or every community assessment visit that we conduct, we always consolidate all our findings in a trip report” (Participant AA/190918/15)

4.2. Managing staff turnover

Most participants acknowledged the importance of having institutionalised handover procedures. The project-based nature of humanitarian work creates a situation where there is often no overlap of staff, which complicates the handover process. If there is no overlap between the incoming and outgoing personnel, some of these organisations will arrange for meetings, skype discussions, or webinars to be conducted. Alternatively, they might second someone else from another project and use him or her as a conduit to transfer knowledge between old and new staff. This ensures the two individuals chat about what is happening.

“This is ... the toughest part in this job ... managing all the programmes, I need to make sure that everything flows according to plan, and then if we know one of the programme staff are leaving, we need to make sure that ... there’s no stopping the programme ... we don’t really have a very good succession planning system. And that is something we acknowledge ... for me, since I’ve been here for quite some time, I know that ... whenever there is a staff planning to leave, I will make sure that there is a handover in place, I inform them what kind of documents they need to prepare, what types of handover they need to prepare, what are the notes they need to prepare, and then I’ll make sure that there will be a meeting scheduled for the handing over, from the old staff to the new staff ... secondly, I will make sure that if ... we cannot secure the staff on time, we will find other mechanisms, for example, like if there are other project managers, whose projects are about to end, so we know there are three or four months left to the project ... he [or she] can be loaned to this project” (Participant AD/310718/07)

However, some also admitted that, due to a lack of official policy guidelines surrounding handovers, there are times when the formal handover of duties does not take place. This in turn leads to the loss of institutional knowledge:

“Unfortunately ... we don’t really have a proper handover system in place. [I]f the staff [leaves] ... there is a gap there, between the person who left and the new person who takes [his or her] place” (Participant AD/010818/10)

4.3. Medium for sharing information – whatsapp, retreats, sharing sessions, workshops

We found that many organisations relied on Whatsapp, a free messaging application, for communication and knowledge sharing purposes within their organisations. Using the Whatsapp group as a virtual CoP, staff and volunteers of humanitarian organisations can co-ordinate operations and share vital information before, during and after field responses.

“We have this official [Whatsapp] group that is just information ... we have Whatsapp groups for missions, specific missions, so each time we want to go for missions, we are going to set up a Whatsapp [group], so from there, it is very easy to gather our volunteers, you register online, and then you will be added into our Whatsapp group, and then there’s a briefing online in the Whatsapp group, what you are going to do ... the next step is, we will meet onsite, and then we will have an onsite briefing. It is very fast, you don’t have to have meetings a few times” (Participant AD/010818/09)

Some of the participants also pointed out that they organised informal sharing sessions for their volunteers and staff members. Taking the form of retreats or workshops, these sessions enabled their personnel to reflect on lessons learnt from previous response efforts. It also allowed them to share their experiences with their peers.

It was said

“Many of our capacity building [efforts] are run by volunteers, so whenever people get their skillsets ... they can participate in our training, where they share their activities, of course when we go for missions, they will reflect [about the lessons learnt] during [the] sharing session [with] their colleagues ... we do have workshops ... we are very extremely volunteer-centric ... [we have] a platform for them to share their knowledge” (Participant AA/060618/03)

“Annually, we will have our main retreat, so we will have a three-day two nights retreat, and then we will see what they have to report” (Participant AD/010818/08)

4.4. Lack of resources

The issue of a lack of resources, be it financial or manpower, was also raised. Some participants indicated that their organisations must be strategic about how to use their funding. They cannot afford knowledge management systems that the corporate sector has, and do not have enough resources to specifically hire someone to oversee knowledge management:

“... if we have limited resources, we will of course channel it first to what we do, to our mission, to our objectives, to save people, and then we will always have less than enough resources to employ people to do knowledge management, info management and analysis” (Participant AA/210818/14)

This was a common theme that was raised by most of the interviewees, even those who worked in larger, international humanitarian organisations.

4.5. Using knowledge for change

Finally, a key point that one participant emphasised was that simply collecting, storing and disseminating knowledge and information was insufficient. Humanitarian organisations have a duty to ensure that the knowledge accumulated is used to effect tangible action and change at the organisational level. He called for a “discipline of execution”:

“[F]or me, knowledge management is good, as long as it creates change ... I think ... getting the knowledge and documentation is not difficult, but how do we transform the organisation based on this knowledge ... [and ensure] continuous improvement of the organisation. I think that’s where the challenge lies” (Participant AB/170818/13)

The idea of using knowledge to effect tangible change within organisations relates back to the earlier point raised by another participant about the redundancy of reports, and how most reports are often left unread. If codified forms of knowledge - in the form of reports - are not valued within the humanitarian sector, it raises the question of how knowledge should be transferred more effectively within humanitarian organisations, something which we discuss in the next section.

5. Discussion

Based on data gathered, our research shows that there is no clear system of knowledge transfer in the humanitarian sector. Knowledge remains largely with individuals and not captured in institutional memory. Indeed, there is a broader tendency in the Asia-Pacific to rely on interpersonal relationships and informal decision-making as key decision-making components in humanitarian organisations. The effects of this absence of institutional memory might not be obvious in the short-term, but in the long-term, it may prove to be detrimental to a humanitarian organisation as staff retire or leave the sector. Future generations of humanitarian workers might repeat the mistakes of their predecessors, and as one participant pointed out, they might “re-invent the wheel” every time they respond to an emergency.

Referring to DiMaggio and Powell’s [52] conception of institutional isomorphism, one would expect most humanitarian organisations to conform to so-called industry standards, by having proper, formalised knowledge such as training manuals, handbooks and standard operating procedures in place such as the SPHERE Standards. This diffusion of socially mediated practices within humanitarian organisations should be a natural progression as the sector develops [57]. This is aligned with theories of sociological institutionalism, which highlight how organisations exposed to the same working conditions will be more inclined to conform to the same organisational structures [58]:729).

However, interviews with our participants revealed otherwise, with

many of them choosing to informally transfer knowledge. While almost all the participants indicated a commitment to establish formal mechanisms and a culture of knowledge sharing, many of them cited a lack of resources and staff as justifications for their organisation’s lack of definitive action in this area.

As previously mentioned, Beerli asserts that it is common for the headquarters and frontline staff of a humanitarian organisation to have inconsistent practices. Moreover, frontline staff might challenge the legitimacy and relevance of top-down directives and seek to implement their own ‘best practices’. This could explain some of the discrepancies of knowledge sharing practices in different tiers of the larger and more established organisations. Moreover, it appears that international organisations are shifting away from centralised and monolithic organisational structures towards a post-Weberian conception of bureaucracy, where middle and lower level personnel have more agency and power to dictate practices [59]:47). For example, while upper management policies might emphasise the formalisation of knowledge in the form of reports, operational staff might not necessarily view this as useful, and instead use tacit knowledge transfer, such as over a meal or in a brainstorming session.

As such, our research inevitably raises questions regarding what should be done to improve knowledge management practices within humanitarian organisations more broadly than just in the Asia-Pacific. On the lack of resources and staff, we are perhaps hesitant to accept this notion completely. One participant stated that his organisation relied on a free file-hosting application – Dropbox – to share information and knowledge. Neither expensive nor difficult to use, this tool helps to facilitate information sharing although it does raise humanitarian data security questions. This suggests that the problem is perhaps not one of resources, but rather the absence of strategy. We do acknowledge that more advanced knowledge management systems might be costly to set up and maintain, and often require technical expertise. To this end, some of the participants stated that their organisations were exploring potential partnerships with the private sector to learn from their knowledge management expertise – a potential area for future research.

Another option would be to improve and strengthen what is already in place. In this article, we have identified some reasons behind the lack of codified knowledge in the sector. Reasons range from perceptions of report-writing as a box-ticking or public relations exercise, to a lack of temporal and mental capacity when aid workers are in the field. Our interviews revealed that it is often unrealistic to expect humanitarian personnel to do great work on the ground while also adopting the role of a knowledge management expert. If that is the reality on the ground, one might argue that humanitarian organisations should instead reinforce and further develop the tacit knowledge sharing culture. By promoting the sharing of narratives and stories, they reinforce the experiential learning of humanitarian workers. Ultimately there will need to be a recalibration of tacit and explicit knowledge management to build institutional memory. While it is tempting to scale down on humanitarian activities to allow aid workers to document their experiences more, we need to be careful not to compromise the quality and quantity of humanitarian assistance provided to vulnerable populations. It therefore points to exploring a relationship outside the operational humanitarian organisation and not limited to the private sector to perform this function.

Attempts to encourage the explicit collection of knowledge has had limited effect and points to the need to rethink knowledge management for the humanitarian sector. The practical implications of this study are that incremental and piecemeal approaches to knowledge management have not improved the institutional memory of humanitarian organisations. Rather than incentivising formal knowledge transfer, humanitarian organisations and donors could work together to develop a sector-wide knowledge management approach that draws on both tacit and explicit knowledge management practices in the Asia-Pacific. As Nakanishi and Black [60]:795) assert, disaster management authorities and organisations should endeavour to find a “structured way of integrating

both systems [explicit and tacit/implicit] of knowledge". Finding a balance between learning and efficiency [45]: 21) offers a potential way forward if there is buy-in from both humanitarian organisations and donors. It would entail looking beyond operational humanitarian organisations and donors to form a knowledge partnership with a complementary organisation such as academic institutions.

This study further highlights the theoretical limitations of developing a culture of knowledge sharing in an organisation as a necessary but insufficient condition to knowledge transfer when there is a reliance on donor funding. While the structure of the sector relies on short-term assignments and is characterised by high staff turnover, it highlights the limitations to humanitarian organisations improving knowledge management. Hence, this also highlights the need to reassess the way humanitarian financing is currently carried out. In the immediate term, humanitarian organisations should continue to push for implementing longer project-management cycles, which would mean that donors need to be prepared to earmark more funding for longer term, more sustainable projects but this will not address the structural limitations of operational humanitarian organisations to implement a knowledge management system.

Considering the unpredictability of disasters, are the lessons learnt from one disaster response transferable to the next? While some aspects of knowledge - needs assessment templates and deployment protocols - are generally applicable across most disaster settings, other forms - such as how to engage with indigenous populations - are largely situational and culturally dependent. This tension is what complicates knowledge sharing in a humanitarian setting. As [42]:243) argues, a lot of the programmatic operating procedures of humanitarian organisations are often based on best practices or lessons learnt from previous response efforts. While this is logical - no one wants to constantly re-invent the wheel during every new disaster - this can lead to complacency amongst practitioners and static knowledge management practices [42]:243). They will have no incentive to improve on what they perceive to be de-facto best practices in any given context.

The current and increasing threat posed by disasters requires more robust humanitarian responses from practitioners and donors. This can only be achieved if knowledge is actively exchanged, shared and utilised between humanitarian organisations and with complementary institutions. The onus is on humanitarian organisations and donors to commit to transfer institutional knowledge to current and future generations of humanitarian workers. This study reveals that while a culture of informal knowledge sharing exists within humanitarian organisations in the Asia-Pacific, high staff turnover has limited its effectiveness in building institutional memory. Unlike the private sector where a culture of knowledge sharing is coupled with investment in employees' professional growth over the longer term to facilitate institutional memory, humanitarian organisations are unable to replicate this as a result of the structure of the sector with its reliance on donor funding. It will therefore be more conducive to look at formalised knowledge partnerships with suitably placed institutions not beholden to the constraints of operational humanitarian organisations.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2020.102007>.

Participant List (coded and anonymised, Participant List (coded and anonymised)

AA/280518/01. Personal Interview.
 AB/050618/02. Personal Interview.
 AA/060618/03. Personal Interview.
 AC/120618/04. Personal Interview.
 AA/250618/05. Personal Interview.
 AD/310718/06. Personal Interview.
 AD/310718/07. Personal Interview.
 AD/010818/08. Personal Interview.
 AD/010818/09. Personal Interview.
 AD/010818/10. Personal Interview.
 AD/020818/11. Personal Interview.
 AD/030818/12. Personal Interview.
 AB/170818/13. Personal Interview.
 AA/210818/14. Personal Interview.
 AA/190918/15. Personal Interview.

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