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Competing in the humanitarian marketplace: UNHCR's organizational culture and decision-making processes

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Introduction

When the United Nations was created in 1945, a staffing structure was set up that presented a top-down, quasi-military command structure that was inspired by the League of Nations and the British concept of an independent civil service developed in the 19th century.[1] Accordingly, when the UN General Assembly adopted on 14 December 1950 its resolution 428(V), enshrining the Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, its intention was to create - in line with the UN's overall organizational structure - a vertical and centralized framework that vests the authority to protect refugees in the person of the High Commissioner for Refugees.

Since the end of the Cold War, the humanitarian aid environment has turned into an increasingly complex and competitive marketplace. A significant number of humanitarian actors with different mandates and interests - including inter-governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, private-sector organizations and military contingents - are engaged in humanitarian operations to protect and assist internally displaced persons in situations of civil conflict and natural disaster. They compete for limited and unpredictable funds from donor countries that pressure them for enhanced cost efficiency and greater collaboration.

In response, UN agencies have started restructuring by decentralizing functions and responsibilities to field operations, and outsourcing tasks to external service providers. Furthermore, the international humanitarian community embarked in 2005 upon a major program of humanitarian reform. This reform process has included the creation of more predictable humanitarian financial arrangements, the strengthening of the Humanitarian Coordinator system to better support field coordination, and the establishment of the Cluster Approach.

UNHCR was appointed Cluster Lead for Protection, Emergency Shelter, and Camp Coordination/Management. Today, its declared goal is to become the UN protection agency for conflict and natural disasters.[2] Such a leadership role requires not only cost-efficient organizational structures but also a decisive shift towards a greater external focus, a relational leadership orientation and a style that is flexible enough to adapt to different coordination situations and responds adequately to rapidly evolving circumstances.

This paper examines the extent to which UNHCR's organizational culture, structure, and processes need to change in order to adapt to the participative group processes introduced by the process of Humanitarian Reform and to apply effective leadership in the framework of the Cluster Approach. This paper uses decision-making as an example, which is a key process both within UNHCR and in the clusters, to illustrate the contrast between UNHCR's internal environment and the ever-changing external humanitarian environment.

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[1] D. Salomons, "Good Intentions to naught, the pathology of Human Resources Management at the United Nations" in D. Dijkzeul and Y. Beigbeder (eds), "Rethinking international organizations: pathology & promise," p.111, 2003
[2] See http://oneresponse.info/Coordination/ClusterApproach/Pages/Cluster%20Approach.aspx for information on the cluster approach.

The paper first examines the relationship between UNHCR's structures, processes and organizational culture. In particular it uses different models of corporate culture to assess how UNHCR's vertical unconscious psychological values and assumptions impact on intra-organizational behavioural processes such as decision-making, communication and leadership behaviour. This includes investigating the extent to which lower and middle ranks of the organization are able to participate in internal decision-making processes and considering the skills and attitudes that are rewarded in UNHCR's hierarchical day-to-day activities and the impact of these structures on efficiency, effectiveness and motivation.

The second part of the paper compares UNHCR's decision-making organizational culture with the demands and assumptions of the "horizontal" and "people oriented" decision-making culture that is developing externally as a result of Humanitarian Reform processes and the Cluster Approach. The difference between UNHCR's "directive leadership" approach and the "facilitative leadership" approach, which has been called for as part of Humanitarian Reform, raises some important questions. To what extent, for example, do UNHCR's current efforts to change organizational structure adequately prepare the organization for its envisaged role as "the UN protection agency" in the changing humanitarian environment? And what are the consequences if such reforms fail?

Organizational structure, culture and processes

Organizational diagnostic models have traditionally distinguished between quantifiable "hard characteristics" (e.g. organizational structure) and "soft characteristics" (e.g. organizational culture and processes) that are more difficult to measure.

Rational system theories focus on hard characteristics and assume that they are created, maintained and changed for rational reasons. By contrast, psychodynamic system theories claim that organizational behaviour and structures reflect unconscious individual and collective needs as well as assumptions about people and processes that prevail under the surface of visible "hard characteristics" of the organization. Accordingly, rational and psychodynamic theories differ in their approach to organizational change.

While rational theories focus on changing the visible artefacts of an organization – structures and systems – psychodynamic theories suggest that adapting organizational structures and processes to a changing external environment is ineffective as long as assumptions underlying existing frameworks are not also recognized and adapted to meet new requirements. Individual and organizational defence mechanisms impede awareness of the assumptions and may induce organizations to project organizational culture onto the external environment. This allows them to avoid addressing shortcomings in their organizational culture and internal behavioural processes as well as ignoring the resulting cost-inefficiency and ineffectiveness.

Structures, processes and effective performance

An organization's structure relates to the question of how tasks, responsibilities, work roles, relationships, and channels of communication are defined. It creates a framework of order and command through which the activities of the organization can be planned, organized, directed, and controlled.[3] The key issue about structure is whether it fits with the rest of the organization, so that it may help rather than hinder performance.

Organizational processes in turn relate to the question how people in an organization are working together to transform inputs into outputs. The concept of process thus refers to the interpersonal relations among employees. There are three different approaches to organizational processes. The work process approach focuses on accomplishing tasks. The behavioural process approach has roots in organization theory and group dynamics and focuses on ingrained behaviour patterns. These reflect an organization's characteristic ways of acting and interacting. Decision-making, communication, conflict management, cooperation, and problem-solving processes are examples.[4]. The change process approach – which has roots in strategic management, organization theory, social psychology, and business history – focuses on sequences of events over time.

Studies have shown that an organization's performance is heavily influences by individual and group performances within an organization. Therefore, ineffective group processes and structures within an organization or in one of its sub-systems impact negatively on the organization's overall performance. If for example, an organization has poor internal communication structures, the resulting flawed process is unlikely to lead to effective decisions, even if "solid" structures are in place defining roles, responsibilities, norms, and rules.[5]

Organizational culture as a "cultural iceberg"

Over the past decades, much has been written about how organizational culture impacts organizational efficiency, effectiveness, and change. Many definitions of organizational culture have been proposed: ranging from a more superficial "the way we do things around here"[6] and the more articulate "a pattern of shared values, norms, and practices that help distinguish one organization from another;"[7] to the more complex "the specific collection of values and norms that are shared by people and groups in an organization and that control the way they interact with each other and with stakeholders outside the organization;"[8] and "a pattern of basic assumptions that

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[3] L.J. Mullins, "Management and Organizational Behaviour," 1993

[4] D.A. Garvin, "The processes of organization and management," in: Sloan Management Review, 1998; R. Schwartz, "The Skilled Facilitator Fieldbook," p.16, 2005

[5] R.Schwarz, "The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers and Coaches," pp.17-39, 2002
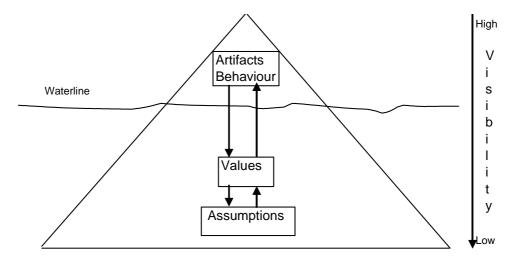
[6] T.E. Deal and A.A. Kennedy, "Corporate Cultures: the Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life," 1982; J. Balogun & V. Hope Hailey, "Exploring Strategic Change," 2004

[7] Higgins, McAllister et al, "Using Cultural Artefacts to Change and Perpetuate Strategy," 2006;

[8] C.W.L.Hill and G. R. Jones, "Strategic Management," 2001

the group has invented, discovered or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration."[9]

The last definition – by Schein – suggests that in order to really understand a culture and its visible behaviour patterns, one has to investigate an organization's underlying values and assumptions; "which are typically unconscious but which actually determine how group members perceive, think and feel," and which constitute the core of organizational culture.[10] For Schein, organizational culture is a "cultural iceberg," whose visible top above the surface consists of "artefacts" and "behavior," which are manifested inter alia in the organizational structures, behavioural processes such as decision-making, power and control mechanisms, and leadership role models.

Source: adapted from E.Schein, "Organizational Psychology", 1980

According to Schein, assumptions, values, and artefacts are linked: artefacts are manifestations of values, while values are manifestations of assumptions. He considers organizational culture to be stable until leaders act to change set value parameters. They do this by demonstration, publicly displaying new values, which they must work hard to make successful in the context of the organization's mandate and the external environment.

Schein argues that if the leader's actions are successful, others in the culture will accept the new values on which these actions were based. If and when sufficient support is generated to make the new values an accepted part of everyday life, the new values will have sunk below consciousness and become taken-for-granted assumptions.[11]
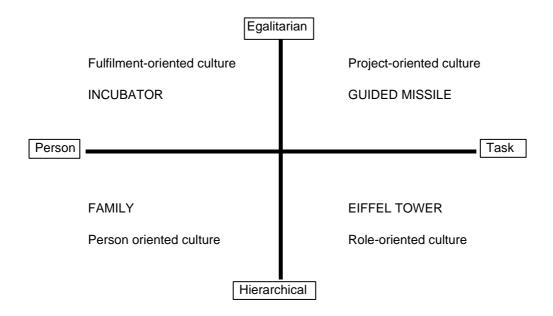
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[9] E.H. Schein, "What you need to know about organizational culture," Training & Development Journal, 1986

[10] E.H. Schein, "What you need to know about organizational culture," Training & Development Journal, 1986

[11] M.S.Poole and A.H.Van der Ven,, "Handbook of organizational change and innovation," 2007

The impact of vertical and horizontal structures on organizational culture

Among the vast number of models that have been developed to explain organizational cultures, many differentiate between vertical (hierarchical) and horizontal (equal) organizational structures and analyze how they impact on organizational culture. Handy, in "Understanding Organizations" distinguishes between "vertical" power and "role" cultures on the one hand, and "horizontal" "task and person" cultures on the other hand.[12] Building on Handy's models, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner[13] have developed a model that presents four types of corporate culture along with two dimensions.

	Egalitarian	
Fulfilment-oriented culture		Project-oriented culture
INCUBATOR		GUIDED MISSILE
Person		Task
FAMILY		EIFFEL TOWER
Person oriented culture		Role-oriented culture
	Hierarchical	

Source: F.Trompenaars, "Riding the Waves of Culture", p.163, 1998

The first (vertical) axis is that of equality versus hierarchy, and the second (horizontal) axis is maps person vs. task oriented culture. These two dimensions intersect to form four types of organizations: on the one hand, the more vertical Eiffel-Tower (role-oriented) culture, and the Family (person-oriented) culture; and on the other the more horizontal Incubator (fulfilment-oriented) and the Guided Missile (project-oriented) culture.

The Eiffel Tower culture is characterized by a bureaucratic hierarchical structure. A tall tower composed of roles, with a broad base of people near the bottom, and a narrow group of seniors all the way to the top. Relationships are contractual and highly impersonal, with individuals carrying out roles as sanctioned by their authority and by the rules. This leads to a role-oriented culture (in Handy's terms). Authority is defined by your role, and status is ascribed to a role rather than to the person who is filling it. This culture tends to be highly resistant to change. In the Family culture,

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[12] A task culture is concerned primarily with the completion of the task or project and can be illustrated by a net. There is no single source of power and often the culture is associated with a flexible project-based structure. Its weak point is failure to develop systems and plan adequately for growth.

[13] F. Trompenaars and Ch. Hampden-Turner, "Riding the Waves of Culture: understanding diversity in global business," 1998

relationships tend to be highly personal and face-to-face. At the same time they are also hierarchical, with the senior manager seen as father figure, having both experience and authority which exceed those of his "children."

In terms of the more horizontal types of organizations, the Guided Missile culture is based upon impersonal relationships, but where the Eiffel Tower culture focuses primarily on process as the means, the Guided Missile culture focuses hard and fast on ends. Getting the job done is of paramount importance. Work is typically done by task teams or project groups. It parallels Handy's task culture. Individuals are treated on an egalitarian basis. Each is there because of the value they add to the end goal.

Incubator cultures in turn focus on the personal fulfilment and development of the members. They tend to be small, with a loose organizational structure that provides routine maintenance and service to a small group of people. This allows the members to concentrate their efforts on their own self-expression and fulfilment. Incubators have both minimal structure and hierarchy, but often develop an environment of intense personal commitment to the inspirational work of core members. They relate closely to Handy's person culture.

A third model[14] contrasts rank-based organizations with peer-based organizations. The former may take the shape of "Big Chief" organizations or "hierarchical organizations," where power and authority are vested at the top of the organization and impersonal control and command are essential. In peer-based organizations, peer-management wisdom replaces classical (hierarchical) leaderships, based on the assumption that everyone is capable of participating in decision-making.

Finally, a fourth system[15] distinguishes between innovative and static organizations. While the latter is characterized by a hierarchical adherence to chain of command, and the function of management is to control personnel through coercive power; the former usually has a flexible structure built upon temporary task forces across departmental lines, whereby the function of management is to release the energy of personnel and power is used supportively.[16]

Having illustrated the distinction that many organizational theorists make between vertical and horizontal organizational structures, the question arises as to what extent the type of structure of an organization influences its culture. First, the founders of an organization set up organizational structures based on their own assumptions and values. These assumptions and values then become part of the organization's culture.

Second, the structure in itself leads to dynamics and behaviour that generate values and assumptions. In short, vertical organizational structures lead to different organizational values and assumptions compared to horizontal structures. The organizational culture of vertical organizations thus differs from that of horizontal organizations.

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[14] J. S. Nielsen, "The Myth of Leadership," 2008

[15] M. S. Knowles, E. F.Holton III, R.A.Swanson, "The Adult Learner," 2005

[16] See also R. Schwartz, "Using the facilitative leader approach to create an organizational culture of collaboration" in "The Skilled Facilitator: a comprehensive resource for consultants, facilitators, trainers and coaches," 2002, who distinguishes between "unilateral control models" and "mutual learning" models

Involvement in decision-making

Decision-making is a process in any organization that to other values such as: communication, cooperation, conflict resolution, problem solving, and leadership. The approach that the organization takes when making decisions, particularly in terms of the degree to which lower and middle ranks of the organization are involved, reflects values and underlying assumptions about people and processes. For determining the degree of participation, the following levels of involvement in decision-making may be distinguished (starting with the highest level of involvement).[17]

Responsibility for Planning and Action Implementing	**Full Responsibility**	8 Participants have full responsibility for all aspects of the given situation, project or organization	high
	Decision-making Authority	7 Participants are authorized to make specific decisions within clearly defined terms of reference	i n v o l v e m e n t
	Implementation Responsibility	6 Participants are designated to implement a specific decision or project	
Providing Input	**Input toward Decisions**	5 Participants provide ideas to be considered by those making specific decisions. Plans may be presented to solicit responses; open-ended questions may be asked	
	Input toward Implementation	4 Participants provide ideas on how a decision can be implemented	
Receiving Information and Services	**Education**	3 Participants are assisted in understanding decisions, how they are affected, and what is expected of them	
	Persuasion	2 People are encouraged to agree or give consent to decisions	
	Information	1 Participants are informed of decisions and operate out of decisions and guidelines established on their behalf	low

Source: adapted from B.Stanfield, "The Workshop Book: from individual creativity to group action", p.xvi, 2002

Levels 1 to 3 fall under the heading "Receiving Information and Services" and do not foresee meaningful participation. Levels 4 and 5 are entitled "Providing Input" and foresee limited participation, albeit still higher compared to levels 1 to 3. Finally, levels 6, 7 and 8 ("Responsibility for Planning and Action Implementing") are levels of authentic participation.

In contrast to the autocratic and consultative approaches, delegative decision-making transfers the onus for decision-making to the group. This style of decision-making applies to groups who have high levels of problem solving skills, expertise and experience to effectively solve the problem or reach a decision. While the group makes the decision, the leader keeps the overall responsibility for the decision and its consequences. This approach thus requires a high level of participation, at level 7 or above of the above spectrum ("decision-making authority").

Finally, facilitative decision making means that the group has good problem solving skills and/or experience, but require a leader ensuring that the group structure and climate help maintain their confidence and momentum to solve the problem. This style thus implies a cooperative effort between the leader and the group to work together to reach a shared decision. Like in the case of delegative decision-making, the highest level of participation ("full responsibility") is attained. However, in

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[17] Brian Stanfield, "The Workshop Book: from individual creativity to group action," p.xvi, 2005
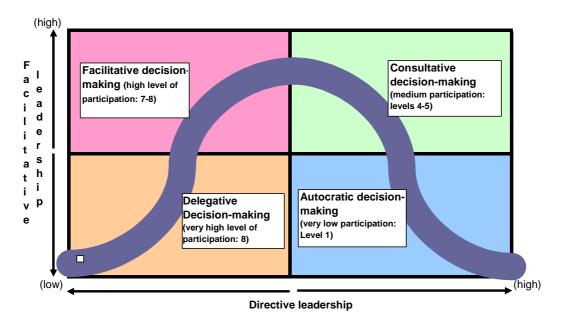
contrast to the other aforementioned decision-making approaches, the leader also has to be much more responsive to the decision-making needs of the group.

The major difference between these styles resides in the focus of power and control. In the extreme authoritarian style, power resides exclusively with the leader. He/She alone exercises the authority for decision-making, arbitration, control, and reward or punishment. By contrast, in the delegative decision-making style, most of the power and authority resides with the group.

Facilitative versus directive leadership

A diagram illustrates how the different decision-making approaches relate to facilitative and directive leadership. If one plots directive leadership on the horizontal axis (x) and facilitative leadership on the vertical axis (y), four quadrants result. The first quadrant encompasses "delegative decision-making." As the group manages most of its internal processes, there is only a very limited need for (directive or facilitative) leadership.

The second quadrant includes "facilitative decision-making", where the leader has a stronger supportive role. The third quadrant covers "consultative decision-making", where the leader has a more directive role, although he/she has to facilitate the consultation process. The fourth quadrant covers "autocratic decision-making" where the directive aspects of leadership are much greater than the facilitative ones. Obviously, in between the different decision-making approaches there is large variation of other decision-making approaches that plot along the vertical and horizontal axis.

Decision-making approaches relating to facilitative/directive leadership
(adapted from K.Blanchard, "Management of Organizational Behavior", 2001)

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Facilitative leadership is characterized by the interaction and communication that support the contributions and expertise of the group members. The role of the leader is to act in the best interest of the group and facilitate the discussion so that it leads to a consensus that reflects the opinions and interests of the group. This style is characterized by a strong focus on relationships and support to group processes. Facilitative power is thus based on mutuality and synergy, and it flows in multiple directions.

Facilitative leadership thus reflects a pluralist view of decision processes. By contrast, a directive leader focuses more on structures rather than group climate. S/he determines rules, schedules, roles and responsibilities, defines the specific tasks of the members of the group, and in turn tells them how and when to accomplish them. Power is thus flowing from top down. Directive leadership is therefore characterized by unilateral decision-making, assertive task behaviour and direct guidance, which reflect a unitary view of decision processes and places no or only limited emphasis on relationship.[18]

The question thus arises of who should be the leader in decision-making. Different approaches have been taken to define leadership. For example, trait theories suggest that leadership characteristics are innate, and accordingly consider that leaders cannot be made. Conversely, style theories stress that it is people's behaviour rather than their psychological characteristics that makes them effective as leaders. These theories both assume that a leader is synonymous with being a manager, that is, they identify leadership with the person in authority, and ignore the possibility that other people in a group may contribute to its leadership.[19]

Instead of thinking about leadership as the characteristics or style of a person with authority, leadership can also be thought of as process.[20] In this sense, leadership means influencing other people: leaders are those people who are expected to be, and are seen to be, influential on important matters. This "process" view of leadership implies that leaders do not necessarily have formal authority and a group can have more than one leader, so that different people may demonstrate leadership in different areas.[21]

For example, one member who is good at creating a harmonious group environment may take the leadership in establishing and maintaining good relations between the different group members. Another one may take the lead in defining the group rules and responsibilities, whereas the formal leader takes the overall facilitation role. In line with contingency theory and the concept of situational leadership,[22] different situations call for different leadership approaches, including facilitative and directive leadership.

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[18] R. Schwartz, "Using the facilitative leader approach to create an organizational culture of collaboration" in "The Skilled Facilitator: a comprehensive resource for consultants, facilitators, trainers and coaches," 2002, distinguishes between "unilateral control models" and "mutual learning models" to explain the different approaches to decision-making in organizations.
[19] Sh. Cameron, "Power, Authority and Influence," Open University Business School, p.113, 2006
[20] D.M.Hoskings, "Organizing, leadership and skilful process," 1997
[21] Sh. Cameron, "Power, Authority and Influence," Open University Business School, pp.114-115, 2006
[22] P.Hersey, K.Blanchard, D.Johnson, "Management of organizational behavior: leading human resources," 2001

Hard and soft skills

"Hard skills" are technical skills that relate to an organization's core business and describe the competencies required for specific jobs and tasks. Hard skills reflect thus to a large extent the person's Intellectual Intelligence Quotient (IIQ). By contrast, "soft skills" (also called "people skills" or "interpersonal skills") fall under the umbrella of Emotional Intelligence (EI) and have personal and social dimensions. The former implies self-awareness and self-management, while the latter includes social awareness and relationship management.[23]

These non-cognitive skills which organizations sometimes label as "cross-functional skills" typically include process skills such as the capacity to generate positive emotions in the relationships with others, sense and discern the important underlying issues in interactions, create a climate of goodwill, build sound relationships through awareness, empathy and consistency, exercise influence through personal and professional integrity, and get things done through the engaged commitment of others[24].

It is important to understand that facilitative leadership requires both hard and soft skills. In terms of hard skills, facilitative leaders must have the substance expertise to identify the individuals or organizations that will form the collaborative teams, define the group's vision, mission and goals, and analyze the best fit of the team in regard to the external environment, so that sound strategic decisions can be elaborated and adopted.

When facilitating decision-making, leaders must ensure that an all- encompassing, methodical and analytical process is in place, which consists of specific rational steps[25] and models to minimize the margin of error in a pressured and demanding environment. The challenge is to be able to be responsive rather than reactive, and able to make decisions in a rational, responsible manner, without bias or pre-conceived ideas that cloud judgment.[26]

On the other hand, facilitative leaders within organizations need to be process experts while maintaining a substantive involvement. Facilitative leaders articulate a vision, convene, energize, facilitate interaction, negotiate relationships and sensitive issues, inspire people to focus on concrete problems and results, sustain the process of solving problems, and secure external support for the team's work.[27] Key skills needed are consensus-building, conflict management, trust-building, "reading" individuals' needs, and strength management. Moreover, facilitative leaders need process knowledge and skills related to collaborative team management. This includes

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[23] R. Boyatzis, D. Goleman and A.McKee, "Primal Leadership: Learning to lead with emotional intelligence," 2003 ; M.Williams, "Leadership for Leaders," p.18, 2005

[24] M.Williams, "Leadership for Leaders," p.19, 2005

[25] See Malik 2003: 22; see also The Economist, "Business Strategy: a guide to effective decision-making," 2003: 66.

[26] The structured and rational approach is best suited to routine decisions in a stable environment. It may however face obstacles such as the difficulty of collecting the necessary information and the time-consuming nature of generating potential solutions. These obstacles have prompted many organizations to opt in their decision-making for "bounded rationality", particularly as far as decisions of strategic direction and operational decisions in rapidly changing environments are concerned. This is a model of decision-making where organizations settle for "satisfactory" rather than optimal courses of action

[27] D.Chrislip and C.Larson, "The Collaborative Leadership Fieldbook," 2002

the ability to organize and facilitate team work activities and discussions, manage meeting agendas, and establish work processes that will accomplish the team's goals.[28]

UNHCR's organizational context

Following the demise of the International Refugee Organization in 1951, the General Assembly created the "Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees" (UNHCR) as a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly. Resolution 319(IV) of the United Nations General Assembly of December 1950 mandates UNHCR with the protection of refugees and the identification of durable solutions, though it places important limitations on UNHCR's functional scope and authority.

Firstly, the resolution states that UNHCR would operate for a period of three years from January 1951, reflecting the disagreement among States over the implications of establishing a permanent body. Secondly, it provided that the competence of the High Commissioner extends only to those refugees who had been displaced as a result of "events occurring before 1 January 1951".

An analysis of UNHCR's statute reveals that the General Assembly (GA) envisioned a vertical structure for the new office. The GA Resolution vests all the authority in the person of the High Commissioner, foreseeing that he should be assisted by a Deputy High Commissioner. On the other hand, the resolution is virtually silent about other UNHCR staff. Only Article 15 refers to "the staff of the Office" which shall be appointed by the High Commissioner within the limits of the budgetary appropriations provided, and shall be responsible to him in the exercise of their functions.

This vertical structure reflects not only the hierarchical structure of the UN Secretariat, but also the assumptions and values that govern international relations. According to the realist theory of international relations, sovereign States are the primary actor of international relations, and create and control international organizations to pursue their self-interest. This implies a hierarchical relationship wherein States determine the scope and evolution of the mandates of international organizations, and control their resources in line with their State interests.

In the case of UNHCR, the High Commissioner is appointed by the UN General Assembly. According to the Statute, the High Commissioner shall follow policy directives given by the General Assembly, and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme (ExCom)[29] – a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly - reviews and approves

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[28] M.Carter, "The Importance of Collaborative Leadership in achieving effective criminal justice outcomes," 2006

[29] The UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) established the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Program (ExCom) in 1958 [Resolution 672 (XXV)] and the governing body formally came into existence on January 1, 1959. ExCom is currently composed of 78 member States that have ratified the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees. ExCom does not substitute for the policy making functions of the General Assembly or ECOSOC but has its own executive and advisory functions. It holds one annual session which usually takes place in Geneva.

UNHCR's program and budget, and advises the agency on international protection issues.

Thus, in the aftermath of World War II the UN General Assembly sought to create a very small and rather weak organization, with a vertical structure consisting of a few hierarchical layers and intended to be operational for a very limited period of time. UNHCR's organizational culture clearly had elements of Handy's power-oriented corporation and the "family" culture described by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner.

The latter family-like culture was illustrated inter alia by the fact that when UNHCR began operations on 1 January 1951, it had a staff of 34 people, based primarily in Geneva, and a budget of only US$300.000. Anecdotes, such as the ability of the entire UNHCR staff to gather around a single piano at the Office's Christmas Party to sing Christmas carols while the High Commissioner himself played piano,[30] reinforce the image of a senior manager seen as father figure seeking personal and face-to-face relationships with his staff.

From its initial role dealing with the residual World War II refugee caseload in Europe, the scope of UNHCR's activities significantly widened when powerful States decided to involve the Agency in confronting Cold War refugee flows into Europe and North America from countries in the Communist block.[31] Since the 1950s, Security Council, General Assembly and ECOSOC resolutions have also expanded UNHCR's responsibilities to include the protection of people other than refugees, such as internally displaced persons and stateless persons. As a result, the organization has grown significantly. Today, UNHCR has a staff of more than 6,500 in more than 116 countries with an annual budget of over US$1 billion.

The change in size and scope has also affected UNHCR's organizational culture. The breadth of UNHCR's mandate has resulted in the creation of a huge variety of individual jobs and the launching of many simultaneous operations. This has resulted in the evolution of a system of control and containment. As a result, employee roles have become more specific, and functions have often been considered more important than the qualities of the human beings undertaking these roles.

In sum, over the past 50 years, due to the gradual expansion of UNHCR's activities and the establishment of many layers in the organization's structure, UNHCR's organizational culture has been transformed from a vertical "family" culture focused on personal relationships, to a role-based bureaucratic hierarchy.

Common vertical assumptions and values within UNHCR

If UNHCR's organizational characteristics were shaped by the asymmetrical assumptions, values, and interests of the founding States in the early 1950s, it is important to ask for why these assumptions and values have been internalized into UNHCR's current organizational culture and perpetuated in a manner so resistant to change.

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[30] G. Loescher, "The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)," p.79, 2008

[31] L. Barnett, "Global governance and the evolution of the international refugee regime," Working Paper No.54, New Issues in Refugee Research, 2002,

In UNHCR's case, the asymmetrical assumptions and values of States that have found their way into UNHCR's initial organizational structure are matched by the assumptions and values of UNHCR staff at the individual and group level.

Humanitarian work can attract individuals with difficult and unresolved social relationships, who may seek to avoid family trauma by working with refugees.[32] Working for displaced populations may also provide a sense of identity and a meaning to life for people who have experienced positive emotional states in their childhood, but who as a result of their prolonged expatriate life have become disconnected from their home-lands and therefore self-alienated.[33]

This self-alienation and inner disconnection may be further compounded by the psychological distress that humanitarian workers face[34], including physical and/or psychological risk, inadequate resources for the assigned tasks, ambiguous and/or contradictory expectations about job performance, as well as the disempowering impact that impersonal hierarchical structures have on them. The resulting psychological distress from living in this environment is a combination of cognitive dissonance, angst and guilt.[35]

Arguably, the feelings of disempowerment, insecurity, and anxiety that stem from the above distress leads many staff of vertical humanitarian organizations into a stage of regression, where they unconsciously try even harder to "succeed" in their work so that the organization will love them back and protect them.[36] The feeling that the organization fails them despite all their sacrifices increases their distress and induces many staff to make enhanced use of unconscious defense mechanisms to protect and empower themselves. These mechanisms include denial, distortion, splitting, projection, and identification/idealization.

Denial and distortion imply the refusal to acknowledge the distress and the reshaping of the objective reality to meet internal needs.[37] Splitting means attributing positive characteristics to oneself and negatives ones to other people. Projection means attributing one's unacceptable thoughts and feelings onto someone else, so that the

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[32] See K.Schellinski, "A cause for a home? Human Rights as a new symbol of identity for the uprooted, global citizen," paper given at the Multidisciplinary Conference between Analytical Psychology and Academy on "Contemporary symbols of personal, cultural and national identity: Historical and Psychological Perspectives," 4 July 2008.
[33] K. Schellinski, "Psychological perspectives on living an expatriate life: the hidden cost of uprooted staff" (paper presented at Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule in Zürich), 2009, argues that the disconnection may imply an emotional loss of both the fatherland (a vertical disconnection that is top-down and implies a disconnection from the masculine which is the centering pole) and the mother country (a horizontal disconnection which implies being separated from the earth, from familiar matter and from familiar relations).
[34] See for example I. Peytremann, M.Baduraux, S.O'Donovan, L.Loutan, "Medical evacuations and fatalities of United Nations High Commisioner for Refugees field employees," in: Travel Med.2001 May-Jun 8 (3), 117-121; R. Thomas, "From Stress to Sense of Coherence: Psychological Experiences of Humanitarian Workers in Complex Humanitarian Emergencies," 2008
[35] M. Walkup, "Humanitarianism at risk: from threatened aid workers to self-deceiving organisations" in: Y.Danieli (editor), "Sharing the Front Line and the Back Hills: International Protectors and Providers: Peacekeepers, Humanitarian Aid Workers and the Media in the Midst of Crisis", 2001
[36] B. Wigley, "The State of UNHCR's organization culture," EPAU/2005/08, p.26, 2005
[37] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defence_mechanisms

very same thoughts and feelings are being perceived as being possessed by the other.[38] Idealization means that as way of coping with feelings of helplessness, high-ranking staff become objects of uncritical admiration. Finally, identification implies the unconscious modelling of one's self upon another person's character and behavior.[39]

All of the above defence mechanisms imply a strong element of inequality and asymmetry, and lead to vertical assumptions and values about the relations with people and processes. By identifying with hierarchical rank, status, and prestige and by projecting one's own unconsciously felt powerlessness upon lower ranks, the individual psychological processes translate into vertical relationships and processes.

An "identification-with-the-superior syndrome" results in the unconscious impersonation of hierarchical.[40] As a result, literature on social behaviour stress that given their position of power, assumptions and behaviour of the top management have a significant impact on the collective assumptions and behaviour.[41] One could even argue that "organizations become reflections of their top executives."[42]

The United Nations Organizational Integrity Survey[43] and two reports on UNHCR's organization culture[44] suggest that the desire to reaffirm superiority and self-entitlement, and impose respect and admiration may be an important driving force for people to assume positions of power and influence in UN organizations.[45]

The UN Integrity Survey shows that top management are sometimes perceived as considering the organization as a tool in service to their self-interest, disregarding established procedures and rules when it comes to their personal interests, and avoiding personal accountability.[46] There is also a perception that a key concern for senior managers is to reinforce hierarchical structures so to protect their positions of power, assuming that setting up more equal decision-making processes may jeopardize their position. Regardless of how well-founded these perceptions are their existence gives rise to asymmetrical assumptions and values affecting organizational culture.

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[38] See M.A.Diamond, "The Unconscious Life of Organizations: Interpreting Organizational Identity", pp.6-7, 1993 and B. Wigley, "The State of UNHCR's organization culture," EPAU/2005/08, pp.31-32, 2005

[39] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Defence_mechanisms

[40] M.Kets de Vries & E.Engellau, "A clinical approach to the dynamics of leadership and executive transformation," 2008.

[41] A.Karsten, "Organizing for powerlessness: a critical perspective on psychodynamics and dysfunctionality" in: Journal of Organizational Change Management, 14, 452-467, 2002

[42] Hambrick and Mason, "Upper echelons: the organization as a reflection of its top managers," in: Academy of Management Review, 193-206, 1984

[43] United Nations Organizational Integrity Survey, 2004, prepared by Deloitte Consulting LLP

[44] B. Wigley, "The state of UNHCR's organization culture," 2005 (EPAU/2005/08); B. Wigley, "The State of UNHCR's organization culture: what now ?", 2006 (EPAU/2006/01)

[45] See M. Roberto, "Why Great Leaders Don't Take Yes for an Answer," 2005 and A.Chatterjee & D.C.Hambrick, "It's all about me: narcisstic CEOs and their effects on company strategy and performance". See also M.Popper, "Leadership as Relationship," in: Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour 34:2, p.113, 2004, and K. de Vries and Miller, "Narcissism and Leadership: an object relations perspective," 1985.

[46] United Nations Organizational Integrity Survey, prepared by Deloitte Consulting LLP, pp.44-45, 2004

In line with the unilateral control model[47], UNHCR's core values about people and processes could be described as:

- achieving goals within the organization through unilateral control;

- maximizing personal victory and minimizing loss; and,

- minimizing the generation or expression of negative feelings and acting according to what is considered "rational".

According to Schein's iceberg theory, the above values are based on assumptions. In terms of the perceptions of people, the assumption is that:

- "Truth" comes from higher up; meaning that in the hierarchy, higher ranking officials are presumed as being right and having the answers, whereas lower ranking officials are presumed to be ignorant. "Truth" is therefore defined in terms of status and seniority and thus often excludes lower professional ranks. This holds weight particularly for national staff.

- "Truth" does not have multiple perspectives. There are only "right" and "wrong" answers. Group diversity is therefore often not considered enrichment, but rather a threat to the hierarchy.

- Individual needs and interests of higher ranking officials deserve greater attention and importance than those of lower ranking officials. The assumption is that - in light of a perceived limited public good - interests are not reconcilable, and in a zero-sum game, power decides over whose interests will prevail.

- Enhanced participation of staff in decision-making will erode the power and control of top and middle management. Both groups have reached their position by being successful in the old manner of things and assume that a change could wipe out their field of expertise and importance.[48]

In terms of process, the assumption is that:

- Decision-making structures are more important than processes: in that the question "what decision should be made by whom" is more important than "how the decision should be made."

- Analysis and debate are considered to be more conducive to sound decisions rather than synthesis, inquiry, and dialogue; with the belief that ideas need to be created by upper hierarchical ranks for others to implement.

[47] R.Schwartz, "The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches", pp.70-77, 2002, uses the term unilateral control model, following the Model I developed by C.Argyris and D.A. Schön, "Theory in Practice: increasing professional effectiveness," 1974 and ideas introduced by R.Putnam, D.McLain Smith and P.Mc.Arthur, P. Workshop Materials. Newton, Mass.:Action Design, 1997

[48] L.J.Spencer, "Winning through participation," pp.18-20, 1989

- Effective/efficient decision-making implies that decisions are made only by a few, and the others need to obey the superior orders. Full-fledged participation of staff would turn decision-making into a cumbersome and time-consuming procedure that an operational organization such as UNHCR cannot afford. Therefore, directive leadership is assumed to be more effective and efficient than facilitative leadership.

- Every problem needs only one solution, which should respond to interests of senior management.

- Vertical processes have priority over horizontal processes

In terms of leading decision-making:

- Leadership is synonymous with formal hierarchical authority.

- Key to success is directive leadership that instructs people to carry out designated tasks.

- One and the same leadership style can be used in all situations

On the positive side, the above vertical values and assumptions may instil in the individuals holding decision-making power a sense of empowerment and create mutual vertical connectedness, which ensures organizational cohesion and continuity. There are also particular contexts, such as emergency or crisis operations, where directive leadership and vertical decision-making behaviour may be more effective than facilitative leadership and horizontal decision-making behaviour. However, on the negative side, such empowerment may be seen as external compensation for lacking internal cohesion. Equally, the vertical values and assumptions reinforce hierarchical structures and processes, preventing effective communication.

Decision-making behaviour in UNHCR: different levels of participation

UNHCR appears to have developed a differentiated approach to decision-making whereby the level of UNHCR staff involvement depends on the decision-making issue and phase. A clear distinction can be made between decision-making in the area of staff welfare and personnel issues on the one hand, and strategic decisions on the other. Likewise, staff have more control over decision implementation in comparison with their input into decision-making processes.

In terms of staff welfare and personnel issues, Regulation 8.1 of Article VIII of the UN Staff Regulations foresees "effective participation of the staff in identifying, examining, and resolving issues relating to staff welfare, including: conditions of work, general conditions of life, and other personnel policies." As far as the implementation of the above Article VIII is concerned, various consultative bodies have been created in UNHCR Headquarters to advise the High Commissioner in the field of staff welfare and personnel policies.

The Staff Council is inter alia tasked with safeguarding the rights of UNHCR staff, and with promoting and defending their interests. This includes the conditions of employment, work and general welfare; as well as providing a channel of communication between the Administration and the staff for discussion, cooperation, and negotiation on matters of mutual concern affecting the conditions of service. The Joint Advisory Committee is mandated to advise the High Commissioner on human resources policies, and to contribute towards the better management of the organization.

Finally, the Staff-Management Consultative Body is tasked to identify, examine, and propose general policy directions for issues relating to staff administration and staff welfare within UNHCR. The latter body is meant to link, in a practical manner, individual staff and staff associations in the field with the formal consultative bodies at the Headquarters.

It is noteworthy that, particularly in regard to issues that are subject to scrutiny by internal UN control mechanisms, senior management seems to favour participative decision-making at levels 4 ("inputs toward implementation of decisions") and 5 ("input toward decisions") of the above decision-making spectrum. There are however only very few decisions where UNHCR staff is given full decision-making authority. A different picture arises when it comes to implementing decisions made by senior management. In various areas relating to staff welfare and personnel issues, UNHCR staff are given the responsibility to implement specific decisions or projects.

In the field, staff interests in relation to welfare and personnel issues seem to be defined in a less organized manner. UNHCR inspection missions have revealed that more than half of the Offices inspected do not have properly constituted staff representative bodies as required under the Staff Rules and Regulations. Offices where staff representative bodies exist are predominantly composed of national staff often fail to effectively defend staff interests with senior management in the office, partly because of fear of reprisals and a perceived lack of common interests.

Interestingly enough, in most of the field offices, international staff are not organized and thus often have no common approach to issues relating to staff welfare and personnel issues. In sum, the majority of UNHCR staff in field offices seems to enjoy even less participation in the elaboration and implementation of decisions concerning staff welfare and personnel issues compared to staff based in UNHCR Headquarters.

When it comes to strategic decisions – such as institutional reform, policies, protection strategies and strategic plans – UNHCR staff seem to enjoy a significantly lower involvement in decision-making compared to staff welfare and personnel issues. At the Headquarters level, institutional policies are usually triggered by public pressure, which include donors and other powerful external stakeholders.

In light of the competitive humanitarian environment that sparks rivalries and competition between the different UN agencies, UNHCR is eager to show that it is ahead of other agencies in regard to any issue relating to forced displacement and protection. The High Commissioner's preferred policy outcome sometimes meets with substantially differing positions of the other members of the Executive Office.

This leads either to executive decisions by the High Commissioner,[49] or a process of positional bargaining between the members of senior management whereby sometimes certain actors, such as the Policy and Evaluation Section, may have to play the role of a neutral broker and forge compromises between the different positions.[50] The decision-making process rarely trickles down to involve other divisions in Headquarters, unless the Policy and Evaluation Section launches consultations with the senior management of other divisions. On an even more exceptional basis, consultations reach UNHCR front line staff in the field.

In the area of strategic decision-making, there seem to be much less consultative bodies for the elaboration of decisions compared to the area of staff welfare and personnel issues. The few bodies that do exist are often accessible only to senior staff members. The Field Reference Group, for example, is a body which is made up of some 20 UNHCR field representatives who regularly meet with Headquarters managers and staff to consider topical or emerging protection challenges and issues at the global level, and to provide input towards the elaboration of policies.

In addition, specific task forces are set up to advise the Executive Floor in specific areas. Input towards decisions is usually reserved to very few top managers in the higher ranks of the hierarchy, whereas middle and lower ranks in the bureau and divisions affected by the decisions are either not consulted at all (and merely informed by the senior management that a decision has been made) or only after the decision has been made.

A similar picture arises when it comes to strategic decision-making in the field. Protection strategies and country operations plans are often drafted by the senior management of UNHCR field offices without involving front-line staff – such as national staff, junior professional officers and United Nations Volunteers. Rather than given the possibility to contribute to the organization's decision-making, frontline staff are merely informed of decisions made by the senior management of the office.

In some cases, where consultation procedures are launched, participation of the lower ranks is limited to providing inputs, most of which are often disregarded by the senior management. In short, in the area of strategic decisions, the involvement of lower and middle management ranks is situated between the first and the third level of participation of the above decision-making spectrum (i.e. they are informed of decisions, persuaded to agree to decisions, or educated in understanding decisions).

In sum, when it comes to staff welfare and personnel issues, lower and middle management ranks enjoy a higher degree of participation, with the top management level applying to a certain extent the "consultative decision-making approach." By contrast, in the area of strategic decision-making, decisions are made either without consultation of staff or throughout non-authentic consultation procedures, reflecting an autocratic decision-making style. Where limited participation is allowed, a clear distinction is made between policy/decision making (reserved to senior management)

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[49] V.Mattar and P.White, "Consistent and predictable responses to IDPs: a review of UNHCR's decision-making processes," EPAU/2005/2, p.17, 2005

[50] R.Freitas, "UNHCR's decision making on internally displaced persons: the impact of external and internal factors on policy strategy," in: B.Reinalda and B.Verbeek, "Decision-making within international organizations," 2004

and policy/decision execution (carried out jointly between senior management and middle management).

UNHCR decision-making, efficiency and effectiveness

Having outlined above that UNHCR staff is given limited participation in decision-making and that the leadership approach in decision-making processes within UNHCR is directive rather than facilitative, one must ask about the impact of UNHCR's internal decision-making processes on efficiency, effectiveness, and motivation.

According to the philosopher Huxley, "it's not who is right but what is right that counts." Drucker points out that efficiency means "doing things right" and effectiveness as "doing the right things."[51] While efficiency describes the ratio of input to output, effectiveness refers to the impact on reality ("effect"). In terms of decision-making, efficiency means elaborating and adopting a decision with a minimum of time and resources; whereas effectiveness refers to the extent to which the decision taken achieves recognized objectives.

Obviously, for an organization whose systems focus on results-based management, effectiveness should receive priority over efficiency. Accordingly, participation of UNHCR staff in decision-making cannot be seen as an end in itself. Rather the key question is as to whether and to what extent participation leads to enhanced effectiveness.

Constrained vertical and horizontal information flow

While UNHCR's rules and regulations stipulate that the information within the organization shall flow both bottom-up and top-down, in practice the flow of information is frequently constrained in both directions.

Top-down, members of the executive office that who have not made their career within the organization are particularly likely to struggle with understanding the complex set-up of structures and processes at the middle and lower levels and operational reality in the field. Moreover, as a result of frequent staff turnover, including at the senior management level, valuable institutional memory gets lost. This is why the reasons behind the failure of past reforms are often not always fully understood, which bears the risk of repeating errors committed by past executive offices.

In terms of information flow, senior management shares only a limited amount of information relating to the overall political context of decision-making. An unwelcome consequence of such information deficit is that the Organization is often rife with damaging rumours that spread throughout middle and lower ranks and distort the perception of reality. Throughout UNHCR, supervisors often do not share information with their subordinates systematically, but rather on a need-to-know

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[51] P.F. Drucker, "The Effective Executive The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done," 2006

basis, where only bits and pieces are given to subordinates.[52] As a result, lower levels rarely dispose of the "big picture," resulting in a negative impact on the task related decisions they have to make at/in their level/function for implementing overall policies and strategies.

The lack of transparency has a negative impact on the trust that lower and middle management ranks have in scope and veracity of the top-down information flow. This is reflected in UNHCR Staff Opinion Surveys carried out in 2006 and 2008, one of the few genuine consultations in UNHCR where all staff in HQs and in the field may (anonymously) participate by completing a web-based survey examining UNHCR's organization culture, management, communication and other themes. In 2008, according to the survey, only:

- 41% of staff believed that "communications at UNHCR are open and honest"

- 36% of staff considered that "reasons behind decisions are fully explained"

- 48% had confidence in UNHCR's senior management

- 45% felt that "UNHCR's senior management acts with honesty and integrity".

In sum, the survey reveals the perception that the top-down behavioural processes are not optimal, that communication is not always open and honest, and that decisions are not always adequately explained within the organization. This perception has a negative impact on the bottom-up information flow.

Lower and middle ranks often perceive that pressure is placed on them to "conform," and that questioning decision-making procedures and decisions made by the top management could be couched in terms of "disloyalty;"[53] which could negatively impact individual career aspirations. As a result, they are hesitant to share critical "front-line" information that would challenge the related decision of senior management. Instead they often resort to communication techniques that can be summed up under the title "how to say the truth without saying the truth." The countless ambiguous terms of UNHCR's jargon such as "assessments", "protection" and "assistance" – terms, which all require much more specific explanations in order to be properly understood – are ideal tools to make senior managers believe, throughout reports and emails, that policy decisions of the top level are effectively implemented at the front-line. It should also be noted that passing on information to senior management that nourishes the illusion that decisions have been effectively implemented may lead to personal rewards, such as promotions and assignments to attractive duty stations.

In the same vein, holding relevant information may also become a tool of power in the hierarchical set-up, wherein individual staff members at the lower and middle level hoard, rather than share knowledge and engage in bilateral monopolistic exchanges with senior management.

Finally, it should be pointed out that with the organization's focus on vertical

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[52] J. Nielsen, "The Myth of Leadership: creating leaderless organizations," p.124, 2008
[53] G. Loescher, "The UNHCR and World Politics: a perilous path," p.360, 2008

information flow, the horizontal flow of information - that is, between staff of the same level - is often neglected. As the nature of cooperation within the organization is mainly upwards because of the importance placed on securing superiors' recognition, there is limited inclination among lower and middle ranks to cooperate with each other. Moreover, as the top-down information flow is constrained, frequently staff are simply not in the position to judge what information or inputs other sections or divisions need. This often leads to a duplication of efforts in information gathering and an inefficient information processing.

In sum, serious constraints affect the information flow both top-down and bottom-up, as well as horizontally. As a result, senior management runs the risk of making decisions either without critical front-line information or based on seriously distorted information. This reflects a significant knowledge problem in UNHCR's top-down decision-making system in that those with direct experience of the issue under consideration are not involved in the decision-making of those without such direct experience. If, however, decisions are not based on front-line information, the issue arises whether they are adequate means to resolve front-line problems.

Information management serves a legitimizing function

An analysis of UNHCR's practice of collecting and managing information – both vertically and horizontally – reveals that information often seems to serve a legitimizing function, rather than constituting the basis for decision-making.

In line with a study of Feldman and March on the function of information in organizations, in UNHCR "the gathering of information provides a ritualistic assurance that appropriate attitudes about decision making exist," and that within such a scenario of performance, information rather than being a basis for action "is a representation of competence and a reaffirmation of social virtue".[54] Much of the information that is used to justify a decision within UNHCR is collected and interpreted after the decision has been made, or substantially made. Yet at the same time, UNHCR often seems to collect more information than it can use or can reasonably expect to use in the making of decisions. UNHCR appears to be constantly needing or requesting information, or complaining about inadequacies in information.[55]

Organizational meetings reflect the above ritualistic aspect of information management. Often meetings do not have a clear agenda and meeting goals. Attendees often come unprepared, either because the underlying problem has not been defined or simply because the wrong people have been invited to the meeting. In various meetings, meeting leaders lecture to the participants without a process to guide and structure group discussion. When group discussions occur, participants frequently intervene simultaneously in an uncoordinated manner and at different levels, including those concerning: objective data, emotional responses thereto, significance and implications, as well as new directions. Equally, meetings often fail

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[54] M.Feldman and J.March, "Information in Organizations as Signal and Symbol," in: Administrative Science Quarterly 26 , pp.177-178, 1981

[55] See M. Feldman and J. March, "Information in Organizations as Signal and Symbol," in: Administrative Science Quarterly 26 , p.174, 1981; see also K. Carson, "Knowledge and information problems in large organizations" in: "Organization Theory: a libertarian perspective," 2008

to translate a problem into a problem-solving discussion that lead to specific solutions that could be tested for effectiveness. In short, in terms of decision-making and problem solution a significant number of meetings prove either ineffective or simply unnecessary. Rather their unofficial purpose often seems to comply with the aforementioned information-sharing ritual, and to avoid individual decision-making and thus personal accountability.

Adopting decisions

Decision-making by the senior management at Headquarters often seems to be characterized by positional bargaining, that is, negotiation from positions rather than interests. This approach bears the risk of leading to sub-optimal decisions that do not perfectly reconcile the interests of internal and external stakeholders.

In those areas where senior management allows limited participation of lower ranks in the decision-making process, frequently also the lower levels – mirroring behaviour modelled at the senior management level, and reflecting the collective vertical assumptions that underlie decision-making - engage in the positional bargaining approach. At the Headquarters level, the different divisions and sections involved emphasize the requirements of their own task, rather than the combined task of the organization, while minimizing or ignoring the problems of other divisions. At the field level, UNHCR offices within a country or a region often tend to emphasize the priorities and interests of their operation, failing to forge a regional strategy that is mutually beneficial to all offices.

In sum, positional bargaining while preparing and adopting decisions seems to reflect the perception that the decision-making process is a zero-sum game that will inevitably create winners and losers.

Different levels of efficiency in decision-making

The speed of autocratic decision-making is particularly relevant in situations of emergency where UNHCR's operational mandate is at stake, and where expeditious action is required. Yet when non-authentic consultation procedures are launched to retroactively legitimize decisions made by senior management, divisions, sections, and offices often have to invest a considerable amount of time and resources in preparing inputs which - given the fact that the decision has already been taken - will not necessarily be taken into account, but will prevent them from doing their primary task.

At the field level, the efficiency of decision-making depends on the personality and skills of representatives and head of offices. There are representatives that make decisions in all areas without any consultation, whereas others consult at least senior international staff in the office. It should be noted that there are also representatives who do substantially involve both UNHCR staff at all levels and external stakeholders in decision-making.

Implementing decisions

Given the constraints that affect the information flow within the organization, problems and their root causes often tend to be overlooked. Considering the very limited degree of participation in the elaboration of decisions by middle and lower ranks – and here particularly front line staff, who have direct access to front line data – decisions often fail to respond effectively to the problems that initially triggered the decision-making process.

In the implementation process participation of lower and middle ranking staff is usually higher. They often compose task and working groups which are entrusted with executing decisions. The challenge thereby often lies in adjusting during the implementation phase a flawed decision to reality. This implies a delicate "shuttle diplomacy" between a senior management that is perceived as disconnected and the operational reality on the ground. During this phase, often information comes up that questions the scope and content of the decision. As the organization often treats decisions as final – rather than treating them as hypotheses to be tested – task groups and working groups sometimes seem tempted to adjust the reality to the decision rather than the other way round. The feedback that results from critical reality checks is either withheld in the bottom-up information flow, or phrased in terms that are acceptable to senior management in that it does not feel compelled to revise the initial decision.

Lacking ownership of decisions and motivation

As lower and middle ranks participate in decisions only to a limited extent, they often do not share the same vision and definition of problems, nor do they have ownership of the decisions made. Their commitment to the effective implementation of decisions is thus limited. Consultation procedures that are launched after a decision has been adopted are often viewed as made in "bad faith" and as "manipulative", and further reduce staff's commitment to the success of that decision. When decisions made in an autocratic manner touch upon staff's psychological territory, the action may be even perceived as a territorial violation, and lead to non-compliance or cover rebellion.[56] Such non-compliance may not only mean that the decision is not implemented, but it may also imply that in the bottom-up information flow to senior management, front-line staff portrays the image that the decision is actually perfectly implemented.

In sum, as a reflection of the underlying vertical assumptions, decision-making behaviour in UNHCR appears to be highly vertical, implying autocratic decision-making approaches and limited participation of lower and middle ranks in decisions. As a result, the vast diversity and richness of knowledge, intelligence and creativity that can be found at the lower and middle ranks are not adequately made use of in the decision-making process. This has a negative impact on efficiency, effectiveness and motivation.

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[56] Ch. Handy, "Understanding Organizations," p.325, 1985

National cultural differences

Obviously, in a multicultural organization like UNHCR, national culture differences contribute significantly to the differences in decision-making approaches. Hofstede[57] distinguishes the following areas of national culture differences:

- social inequality, including the relationship with authority

- the relationship between the individual and the group

- concepts of gender and power

- ways of dealing with uncertainty, relating to the control of aggression and the expression of emotions.

In terms of social inequality, Hofstede describes the key differences between small and large power distance societies·[58] In small power distance societies, subordinates and superiors consider each other as existentially equal. Organizations are fairly decentralized, with flat hierarchical pyramids and limited numbers of supervisory personnel. Superiors should be accessible for subordinates, and the ideal boss is a resourceful democrat.

Conversely, in large power distance societies, inequalities among people are both expected and desired. Superiors and subordinates consider each other as existentially unequal. The hierarchical system is felt to be based on this existential inequality. Subordinates are expected to be told what to do. There are a lot of supervisory personnel, structured into tall hierarchies of people reporting to each other. Superiors are entitled to privileges and contacts between superiors and subordinates are supposed to be initiated by the superiors only. The ideal boss, in the subordinates' eyes, is a benevolent autocrat.[59]

The above differences between small and large power distance societies impact on decision-making and leadership approaches. UNHCR employees from small power distance societies are likely to tend towards delegative and facilitative decision-making approaches as well as facilitative leadership. By contrast, employees from large power distance societies are likely to prefer consultative and autocratic decision-making approaches as well as directive leadership.

Measuring the costs of vertical attitudes and behavioural processes

In the absence of quantifiable data, measuring the economic costs of vertical behavioural processes is difficult, albeit not impossible.

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[57] G.Hofstede, "Cultures and Organizations," 1991, pp.13-14

[58] According to Hofstede, Latin countries (both Latin European countries such as France, Spain, Italy and Portugal, and Latin American countries) as well as Asian and African countries are characterized by high power distance values. By contrast, the USA, Great Britain and most of the non-Latin part of Europe are defined by low power distance values.

[59] G.Hofstede, "Cultures and Organizations," 1991, pp.35-37

A recent study has focused on the specific behavioural process of conflict management within UNHCR and concluded that as a result of ineffective conflict management processes; UNHCR suffers a loss of around US$30 Million per year. This calculation is based on the assumption that work efficiency is seriously reduced for staff that faces conflict several times per week. [60]

If one widened the focus of the study to also include other behavioural processes such as decision-making and communication, the efficiency losses could be much higher. A comprehensive survey would most probably reveal a causal link between the vertical behavioural processes, and physical and mental health problems.[61] The costs thereof for the UN system as well as the lost opportunity costs could well amount to over $100 million per year, thus up to 10% of UNHCR's annual budget.

In sum, UNHCR's internal environment with its vertical behavioural process entails tangible economic costs.

The strategic context: Humanitarian Reform and the Cluster Approach

The ad hoc nature of many international responses to humanitarian emergencies prompted the international humanitarian community in 2005 to embark upon a major program of humanitarian reform, with the intention of providing a more predictable and effective system of humanitarian response. The Reform process aimed to create more predictable humanitarian financial resources to ensure and enable a prompt response to new or rapidly deteriorating crises, to strengthen response capacity by establishing a system of cluster leads in those areas of activity where there are clearly identified gaps in response capacity; and to strengthen of the Humanitarian Coordinator system to better support field coordination.

The Cluster Approach is based on the idea that effective collaborative responses to crises require adequate structures and processes. At the global level, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) designed global leads for nine clusters: these include UN agencies, NGOs, international organizations, and the International Red Cross and the Red Crescent Movement. At the global level, the aim of the cluster approach is to strengthen system-wide preparedness and technical capacity to respond to humanitarian emergencies by ensuring that there is predictable leadership and accountability in all the main sectors or areas of humanitarian response.

At the country/field level, cluster working groups are expected to set up sub-cluster groups. Cluster working groups – usually based in country capitals - are supported by

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[60] H.Buss, "Measuring and reducing the cost of conflict at work in UNHCR: the business case of conflict management," 2009

[61] According to the UNHCR Medical Section, 50% of UNHCR staff is currently resorting to psychological/psychotherapeutic interventions. These mental health problems may not only result from problems related to unresolved conflictual issues and the difficult external work environment, but also from the vertical behavioural processes inside UNHCR which foresee only a limited degree of participation and impact the motivation of staff. In an organization that has a total of 6.500 staff members, 30.000 certified sick leave days per year (which corresponds to approximately 140 full time positions throughout the year) reveal that the state of health and motivation of UNHCR staff is far from being optimal. It should be noted that the sick leave days per staff member have increased from 3.96 days in 2003 to 4.52 days in 2007 (source: H.Buss, "Measuring and reducing the cost of conflict in UNHCR," p.47, 2009)

sectoral coordination mechanisms at the sub-field level. The rationale behind this new system for coordination and leadership is to strengthen humanitarian response through a system of accountability and partnership. Accordingly, the role of cluster leads at the country level is to facilitate a process aimed at ensuring well-coordinated and effective humanitarian responses in the sector or area of activity concerned. According to the Terms of Reference for Sector Leads at the Country Level, the following are specific responsibilities of these sector leads at the country level: the inclusion of key humanitarian partners; the establishment and maintenance of appropriate humanitarian coordination mechanism; and the coordination with national/local authorities, state institutions, local civil society, and other relevant actors.[62]

In terms of accountability, cluster lead agencies are accountable to the Humanitarian Coordinator for ensuring that the tasks of the cluster are carried out effectively. The Humanitarian Coordinator in turn is accountable to the Emergency Relief Coordinator, who reports to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. In practice, cluster approach evaluations have revealed that the vertical system of accountability faces limitations. Lacking any real management authority over the cluster lead agencies, Humanitarian Coordinators have not demonstrated the ability to replace poorly performing cluster leads and appoint more suitable replacements. Moreover, so far Humanitarian Coordinators have rarely been held accountable by the Emergency Relief Coordinator for a Cluster's overall performance in light of the country humanitarian strategy decided with the Emergency Relief Coordinator. Finally, the Emergency Relief Coordinator currently does not have the means to hold agencies accountable for their preparedness and effectiveness as global cluster leads, so that his ability to influence agencies' behaviour is limited to persuasion[63] and political pressure through the IASC.

Similar to the relationships between cluster lead agencies, humanitarian coordinators, and the Emergency Relief Coordinator, there is no enforceable hierarchy within the cluster groups. To start with, cluster members – both UN agencies and non-UN actors - are only accountable to the cluster lead if they have made specific commitments to this effect. While cluster leads themselves are not expected to carry out all the necessary activities within the sector or area of activity concerned, they are required to ensure that the tasks of the cluster are carried out effectively. This may well mean that should no other member of the cluster be able or willing to carry out that task, the organization leading the cluster has to take action itself as a "provider of last resort", where this is necessary and where access, security and availability of resources make this possible.

In short, as "upward accountability" and "management authorities" are weak and results cannot be enforced in a top-down manner, the efficiency and effectiveness of the cluster approach rely heavily on personal leadership and the establishment of harmonious coordination processes within and between the different cluster groups.

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[62] Inter-agency standing committee (IASC), "Guidance note on using the cluster approach to strengthen humanitarian response," 2006; Humanitarian Policy Group, "Lost in translation: managing coordination and leadership reform in the humanitarian system," 2007

[63] A.Stoddard, A.Harmer, K.Haver, D.Salomons, V.Wheeler, "Cluster Approach Evaluation: Final Draft" (OCHA Evaluation and Studies Section), p.43, 2007

Processes in the cluster system

The Cluster approach implies a "new way of working", emphasizing horizontal behaviour processes such as participative decision-making, communication, negotiation, and team-building. Likewise, the principle of partnership requires cluster leads to adopt leadership styles and vales that appropriately respond to different situations and strive for an inclusive relationship of equal partners.[64]   In line with Schwartz, these values could be described as follows:

- a pre-condition of effective decision-making is that valid information is collected and shared irrespective of whether the information aligns with your interests and positions,

- effective collaboration requires free and informed choice so that the members of the cluster group agree to things because they have the relevant information and because the decision makes sense, not because they feel manipulated or coerced into it,

- internal commitment to decisions resulting from the above two values generates the motivation of the members of the cluster group to do whatever is necessary to implement the decisions, and

- mutual empathy for needs and interests prepares the ground for engaging in conversations in which members of the cluster group can mutually learn from each other how to increase their effectiveness.

The above values are based on the following assumptions about people and processes:

In terms of perception of people,

- Wisdom is distributed among all members of the cluster group regardless of rank and organizational mandates. "Truth" is therefore not a monopoly of the cluster lead, but is shared with international and non-governmental organizations, including local NGOs.

- "Truth" has multiple perspectives that can be integrated into a common vision. Diversity is not only enriching but key to defining innovative, creative, and effective responses to complex problems.

- Individual/organizational needs and interests have equal importance and are reconcilable. Mutually beneficial agreements that reconcile interests can be forged through principled (interest based) negotiation.

- Inclusive partnership and genuine participation in joint decision-making will lead to effective results and thus strengthen the position of the cluster lead. Participation of cluster members in the decision-making and resulting group effectiveness will strengthen the authority of the cluster lead.

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[64]http://www.humanitarianreform.org/humanitarianreform/Portals/1/cluster%20approach%20page/training/Humanitarian%20Action%20Training%20-%20Key%20Messages.pdf

In terms of process,

- Harmonious decision-making processes together with clear roles and responsibilities are the basis for group effectiveness. The question "how the decision should be made" is thus as important as the question "what decision should be made by whom."

- Inquiry and dialogue are the key tools for understanding different perspectives and integrating them in joint decisions. Ideas and decisions imposed upon cluster members will not create ownership and thus will not be implemented.

- Effective/efficient decision-making implies that all cluster members are committed to the joint vision and participate fully and directly at all stages of decision-making.

- Every problem has several solutions among which the best should be retained.

- Mutual trust, ownership, and transparency foster horizontal cooperation, including an effective information flow

In terms of leading decision-making,

- Leadership is not dependent upon a formal position. Different people in a group may demonstrate leadership in different areas.

- Key to success is facilitative leadership that awakes commitment and involvement.

- Different situations require different leadership styles.

To understand what level of coordination is required in the cluster approach, it is important to first outline the different coordination models that humanitarian actors may resort to when working together.[65] The lowest level of coordination is that of "not doing harm to each other's programs." Humanitarian actors share with each other information on a systematic and regular basis, without structuring or prioritizing information. In the framework of this approach, decisions are only made in regard to procedural and structural questions related to meeting management; such as the adoption of meeting agendas, ground rules, and the elaboration of minutes.

The next level is "Technical Coordination". At this level, humanitarian actors are required to agree on standards in areas such as protection and assistance. It can also involve establishing arrangements between agencies and organizations for mutual support and referrals between UN and non-UN humanitarian actors. At this level of coordination a higher degree of decision-making is required.

The third level is "Operational Coordination." This involves establishing common objectives in critical operational areas such as security of humanitarian operations, setting objectives for accessing populations in need and agreeing advocacy objectives for resource mobilization. This involves sharing and using sensitive information and

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[65] OCHA, "Background Paper 2: Enhancing UN / non-UN Engagement at Field Level," 2006

analysis.

The last and highest level is "Strategic Coordination." This is seen as an engagement and collaboration, where there may be immediate opportunity for joint or shared assessment and priority setting; gap identification and resource allocation in response to agreed priorities commitment to jointly channel or reallocate resources/ personnel; and greater transparency and accountability between partners. A more dynamic model would build on the planning cycle through program cycle coordination, aiming at a working relationship, which builds on joint or coordinated assessment and planning, monitoring and evaluation. At this level, co-ordination incorporates strategic decision-making.

The IASC Guidance Note on using the Cluster Approach foresees that coordination within the cluster should attain the highest level of coordination, i.e. strategic coordination. The "Generic Terms of Reference for Sector/Cluster Leads at the Country Level" in Annex 1 of the IASC Guidance Note stipulate that within the clusters members shall decide inter alia over the appropriate distribution of responsibilities within the cluster, the analysis of needs, and the content and objectives of plans based on available data as well as over the establishment of response strategies and action plans. In sum, clusters have to make not only decisions about procedural and structural issues relating to their coordination management but also decisions of strategic direction. This raises the questions as to how decisions shall be made and how leadership styles impact on the decision-making behaviour of the embers of the cluster.

Contrasting values and assumptions about people, processes, and leadership

There is an apparent contrast between the vertical values and assumptions that determine the decision-making within the UNHCR, and the horizontal values and assumptions that underlie the cluster approach. If the core values and assumptions that govern the former are based on the unilateral control model, the cluster approach follows the ideas of the mutual learning model. Accordingly, the behaviour shown in UNHCR's internal decision-making processes differ significantly from that expected to occur in the framework of the cluster approach. These differences may be summarized as follows:

UNHCR	Cluster Approach
Hierarchical obedience	Commitment to effective horizontal group processes, including the active pursuit of diversity of opinions and conflict resolution
Vertical cooperation	Horizontal cooperation
"Thinking inside the box"	"Thinking outside the box"
Processing/Filtering information	Valid information and free and informed choice

Advocacy and positional bargaining	Inquiry and interest-based negotiation
Avoiding and diffusing accountability	Group commitment to effectiveness and efficiency

Reproducing decision-making behaviour with external partners

The contrast between UNHCR's vertical values and assumptions and its resulting vertical behavioural processes on the one hand, and the horizontal values and assumptions and resulting horizontal behavioural processes of the cluster approach on the other hand is significant. This is because UNHCR's vertical values/assumptions and determine not only the relationships within the organization, but are also mirrored in its relations with external partners. This echoes studies about inter-organizational relations, which have shown that vertical organizations have a tendency to approach coordination challenges in the outside world through directive leadership approaches and hierarchical processes.[66]

As far as UNHCR's relationship with NGOs is concerned, the organization has traditionally viewed NGOs as "implementing partners" who carry out activities in the framework of sub-agreements with UNHCR. This relationship often amounts to a hierarchical relationship, wherein UNHCR assumes the role of supervisor and NGOs that of subordinates executing decisions made by UNHCR. Capacity-building exercises carried out by UNHCR often seem to amount to "educating" the non-governmental partners through lecture-style training on UNHCR's view of the reality, rather than inquiring into the partners' vision and interests, synthesizing ideas, and making consensual decisions.[67]

A survey carried out in 2002 by the High Commissioner's Task Force on Partnership revealed that there is a conflict between the horizontal approach towards coordination of NGOs and the vertical approach to decision-making by UNHCR.[68] According to the NGOs, many UNHCR staff consider NGOs as mere executive arms of UNHCR programs and not as true partners when meeting shared challenges. The survey reveals that NGOs recognize the need for coordination but often resent being coordinated by UNHCR, which in their view does not consider their skills and expertise. Likewise, they note UNHCR responds negatively to criticism, instead of seeing such feedback as an effort to strengthen UNHCR's mandate and performance. Various NGOs stressed that they would prefer more substantial involvement in program planning and scenario development, instead of being informed only after internal UNHCR discussions. Particular reference was made to UNHCR's hierarchical approach towards national NGOs, who claim they are rarely able to participate in meetings and get their views/concerns heard.

If UNHCR reproduces in its relationship with NGOs vertical values, assumptions, and processes, the organization seems to project both vertical and horizontal organizational dynamics onto peer agencies such as other UN agencies. Vertically,

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[66] See for example F.M Burkle and R. Hayden, "The concept of assisted management of large-scale disasters by horizontal organizations" in: Prehosp Disast Med 16(3):87–96, 2001

[67] F.Groot, "Evaluation of UNHCR training activities for implementing partners and government counterparts," EPAU/2000/02,2000

[68] see inter alia UNHCR, "Interlocutor review: NGO cooperation and partnership with UNHCR," 2006

UNHCR is sometimes be perceived by peer agencies as arrogant[69]. Horizontally, inter-institutional rivalries and competition for funds with key donors, advocacy rather than inquiry – in situations that are perceived as zero-sum games as well as limited transparency – may be seen as reflecting UNHCR's internal horizontal relationships between different sections, departments, and offices.

A rather interesting picture arises when examining UNHCR's relations with persons of its concern. Traditionally, aid agencies have treated victims of conflict and natural disasters as helpless and passive recipients of humanitarian assistance - thus creating dependency. This paternalistic approach reflected aid workers' vertical values and assumptions about their relationship with the victims. In recent years, development and aid agencies have moved to a community-based approach which considers refugees, IDPs, and other persons of UNHCR concern as equal partners in the decision-making process. UNHCR policy and guidelines now enshrine the right of persons of UNHCR concern to participate in decisions on matters that affect their lives.[70] Obviously, a series of obstacles hamper the implementation of this approach. One of the biggest obstacles is that the same UNHCR staff who are called to involve persons of UNHCR concern at all stages of decision-making do not enjoy the same right within UNHCR's own internal decision-making processes. This adds force to feelings of disempowerment, insecurity, and anxiety and reinforces staff resistance against refugee and IDP participation.

In sum, UNHCR's vertical values, assumptions, and behaviour are reflected in its relations with numerous external partners. This has an impact on inter-organizational coordination, as the unilateral control model practiced by UNHCR clashes with the emerging mutual learning model underpinning humanitarian reform.

Real-time evaluations: assessing UNHCR's performance as cluster lead

Since the launch of the cluster approach in 2005, cluster approach participants and donors have undertaken a number of reviews and self-assessments. These include IASC interim self-assessments of the implementation of the Cluster Approach in the Field, inter-agency and agency real-time evaluations or lessons-learned exercises, formal and informal surveys carried out by donors, and reports elaborated by International NGOs.

These assessments indicate that the first years of the cluster approach have produced mixed results. On the positive side, the cluster approach has demonstrated its potential to improve the overall effectiveness of humanitarian response. Improvements have been made in identifying and addressing gaps, setting priorities, and extending capacity. Equally, predictability of leadership was enhanced by lead agencies accepting responsibility for the totality of their sectors. The cluster approach has also helped to devolve coordination to field levels more proximate to the point of delivery. Moreover, there are indications that humanitarian partnerships have been improving.

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[69] B. Wigley, "The State of UNHCR's organization culture," p.28, 2004
[70] UNHCR, "The UNHCR Tool for Participatory Assessment," 2006

On the other hand, the same assessments highlight that many challenges remain. These include the fact that the success of specific clusters is often personality driven. Effective coordinators adopt a "facilitating" approach in relation to partners while also having the authority to lead planning and prioritization processes, to mediate and overcome disputes and move the body forward.[71] By contrast, ineffective coordinators reproduce autocratic leadership styles, turn meetings into formal and time-consuming rituals rather than using them as efficient decision-making tools that should build consensus, and they fail to act as "honest brokers" by fostering own interests.[72]

UNHCR's real-time evaluations confirm that the internal management of clusters varies greatly, depending on the skills of the individual leading. They reveal that in many operations UNHCR staff has shown deficiencies in horizontal soft skills, such as coordination, meeting management, facilitation, and consensus building.[73] The same reports point out that "there is a temptation for the more experienced UNHCR personnel to voice their preference for "the old way of doing things" in which the organization had an unambiguous leading role and contracted implementing agencies to undertake operational activities on its behalf."[74] In other words, the vertical values and assumptions that have traditionally governed UNHCR's internal and external behavioural processes lead many staff members to try to reproduce vertical behaviour and directive leadership within the cluster approach.

Various field-oriented and practical trainings confirm that staff have a tendency towards vertical behaviour and directive leadership. For example, there are different simulation incidents in the Workshops for Emergency Managers which test participants' negotiation and coordination skills with external partners. These workshops have revealed that UNHCR staff (as well as other UN staff) frequently use abstract organization jargon, tend to overemphasize advocacy compared to inquiry, fail to change perspectives and build relationships, and struggle with facilitating group processes.

In sum, the performance of UNHCR staff – conditioned to practice "vertical" decision-making – means that UNHCR runs the risk of falling short of the effectiveness and efficiency expected from a Cluster Lead aspiring to become the UN protection agency.

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[71] A.Stoddard, A.Harmer, K.Haver, D.Salomons, V.Wheeler, "Cluster Approach Evaluation: Final Draft (OCHA Evaluation and Studies Section)," p.10,.2007

[72] A.Stoddard, A.Harmer, K.Haver, D.Salomons, V.Wheeler, "Cluster Approach Evaluation: Final Draft (OCHA Evaluation and Studies Section)," p.10,.2007. See also Action Aid International, "The evolving Cluster Approach in the Aftermath of the Pakistan Earthquake: an NGO perspective," 2006: "NGOs described a non-participatory attitude on the part of the UN, where they were treated simply as implementing partners, or "policed", rather than having an input into conceptual thinking…Local NGOs regarded cluster meetings as meetings of an elite group of foreigners, which, though helpful, did not pay sufficient attention to the ideas and issues raised by local NGOs."

[73] See for example, UNHCR, "Realtime evaluation of UNHCR's IDP operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo," PDES/2007/02 -5, paragraph 39, 2007

[74] UNHCR, "Realtime evaluation of UNHCR's IDP operation in Uganda",PDES/2007/02 – RTE 3, paragraph 40, 2007

Addressing the gaps: UNHCR's efforts to implement organizational change

This analysis leads to two important conclusions. Firstly, UNHCR's internal environment – including its vertical values, assumptions, behavioural processes, and unilateral control model – contrast with the "mutual learning model" that underpins the Humanitarian Reform process and the Cluster Approach. Secondly, in line with open system theories, UNHCR's internal environment and the external humanitarian environment are interdependent – that is, the external humanitarian environment can trigger changes in UNHCR's internal environment just as much as UNHCR can influence the external environment.

Against that background, various questions arise:

- Is it possible for an organization with a "tall" hierarchy and a vertical organizational culture to apply, in the external arena, facilitative leadership and ensure effective coordination with humanitarian partners at the horizontal level?

- Will UNHCR's involvement as cluster lead in the changing humanitarian environment transform its vertical organizational culture into a more horizontal culture? Or, will UNHCR, together with other UN agencies, "verticalize" the external humanitarian environment by reproducing vertical assumptions, values, and processes in the framework of the cluster approach?

- How can UNHCR staff acquire horizontal coordination, and leadership skills and attitudes, despite the fact that inside the organization they face – on a day-to-day basis – behavioural processes wherein vertical rather than horizontal skills and attitudes are solicited and rewarded?

- Are UNHCR's current reform efforts leading the organization towards becoming an organization that is able to demonstrate facilitative leadership and horizontal skills and attitudes?

Organizational change: external environment versus organizational context

Generally speaking, change can be understood as a journey that involves moving from a present state, through a transition process, to a future or desired state. The desired state is often referred to as the vision.[75]

To help senior managers design a context sensitive approach to change within their organization, management theory has developed the "change kaleidoscope," which is a diagnostic framework for managers to determine which approach to change is best suited to a particular change context. The model takes into account the context in which change occurs. It is based on the idea that each organizational change situation is in some way unique. It provides a framework for analyzing the change situation, and in each case an individual picture emerges based on the particular configuration

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[75] R. Golembiewski, "Handbook of organizational consultation," pp.14-15, 2000

of contextual features. A clear understanding of the circumstances surrounding the change informs design choices about how best to approach and manage change.[76]

The kaleidoscope contains

- an "outer ring" that relates to the wider organizational strategic change context,

- a "middle ring" that relates to the organizational context in which the change must take place, and

- an "inner ring" that correlates with the menu of design choices open to change agents when implementation of change is attempted.[77] The outer ring refers to both the *far* and *near* (external) environment. The former relates to the political, economic, social, and technological forces at play which can be neither controlled nor influenced from within the organization, and which drive the need for change. The latter relates to customers, clients, contractors, and competitors, – those who an organization can influence but not control.

- The middle ring deals with the organization's current situation in relation to the required changes. The picture that emerges from analyzing the hard and soft characteristics of an organization can help senior managers design an appropriate approach for a particular change, given the organizational circumstances and the wider strategic context.[78]

Third, with regard to the inner ring, three types of change can be differentiated:[79]

- "Incremental" or "first order" change is an improvement on the old way of doing things, with the aim of doing more things or doing things better. This approach does not involve a fundamental re-appraisal of the underlying central assumptions and beliefs within an organization.

- "Transitional" change involves the implementation of new strategies and requires the re-arranging or dismantling of old operating methods. In this case, the organization can first effect an adaptation to do with building capability among its staff, and maybe raising levels of readiness for change.

- "Transformational" or "second-order" change is usually the most profound and traumatic, as it entails changing an organization's culture. This includes reform of shared and taken-for granted assumptions, an altered distribution of power, re-organization to support new roles and break the traditional business-as-usual structure, revised communication and decision-making patterns, as well as fresh leadership bringing the necessary drive, energy and commitment to overcome organizational inertia.

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[76] J. Balogun, "Strategic change," in: Management Quarterly Part 10, p.2, 2001
[77] J.Balogun, "Strategic change," in: Management Quarterly Part 10, p.5, 2001
[78] Anne McCann, "Lessons in change," pp.79-89, 2008
[79] C.Mabey, "Preparing for Change," in "Managing Projects and Change", Open University Business School, p.112, 2006

- Numerous political statements, policy papers and articles reflect UNHCR's awareness of the changes in the international humanitarian environment and world politics as well as the shift in the dynamics of forced displacement.[80]

- The bipolar world of the Cold War era where UNHCR worked as a central UN player mostly in asylum-countries to protect refugees fleeing from communist states or repressive military regimes, has given way to the multi-polar world of the post-Cold War era where people are fleeing mainly civil or intra-state conflicts. Both industrialized and developing countries have adopted restrictive asylum policies on account of security and economic interests, and push for the containment of forced displacement within the countries of origin. However, as a result of enhanced global media attention to humanitarian emergencies, governments have also pushed for the increased involvement of the UN with intra-country protection approaches, as well as increased effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian partnerships.

- In sum, UNHCR is aware that today's challenges relate increasingly to internal displacement and that the agency must reposition itself to provide protection and assistance to displaced people in need, regardless of whether they have crossed an international border. In UNHCR's view, becoming the "UN's Protection Organization" – thus assuming a comprehensive protection role with regard to refugees, conflict induced IDPs and victims of natural disasters – will increase UNHCR's competitiveness with regard to other UN agencies, international and non-governmental organizations, in the fight for resources within the ever-expanding humanitarian community.

- However, it is questionable whether the agency has also understood the organizational change context in which the change must take place. Senior management has not come up with a comprehensive diagnosis of the agency to compare the *status quo* of UNHCR's hard and soft characteristics with the requirements of the external environment. Instead, UNHCR's assessment of the current state has been limited to the analysis of hard characteristics; such as structures[81] and systems,[82] and has sidelined the assessment of soft characteristics; such as organizational culture, and behavioural processes. This reflects the fact that senior management's approach to change has been largely vision-driven rather than gap-driven.

Secondly, senior management have framed organizational change in political and structural terms. The political frame starts with the premise that the organization is bound by the allocation of scarce resources and that donor countries are UNHCR's most powerful and important stakeholders. Consequently, the rationale behind change is to meet key interests of donor countries such as increased cost-efficiency. The structural frame in turn reflects senior management's view that the agency's organizational problems reflect inappropriate structures and systems which can be resolved by redesign and reorganization.

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[80] See for example A. Guterres, "Millions uprooted: saving refugees and the displaced," in: Foreign Affairs, September/October 2008 and UNHCR, "UNHCR's expanded role in support of the inter-agency to situations of internal displacement," PDES/2006/06, paragraph.24, 2006

[81] This includes Headquarters review as well as regionalization and decentralization

[82] This includes human resource management, results-based management and the training system

By viewing organizational change predominantly from a political and structural angle – driven by an overall vision rather than based on a thorough analysis of the status quo in light of the requirements of the external environment – the organization's strengths and weaknesses have not been analyzed from a cultural and human frame. This implies that the UNHCR's "soft characteristics", including organizational culture and behavioural processes, have not been examined. Senior management have not analyzed the values and assumptions underlying decision-making behaviour and other related behavioural processes in the organization and the hierarchical attitudes, both within the organization and towards external actors. In sum, change management has not been based on a holistic implementation of all four frames, but predominantly on the structural and political frames which do not question the unilateral control model that underpins UNHCR's organizational culture.

Accordingly, measures for change have been designed as an incremental change based on the assumption that improving structures and cost-efficiency will improve the organization's overall performance. Adopting this approach, the assumptions underlying UNHCR's decision-making behaviour have not been re-appraised, and little effort has been made to address those parts of UNHCR's organizational culture that conflict with the new requirements of the humanitarian environment.

UNHCR's structural and management change process

Having already addressed UNHCR's relation to the outer and middle ring of the change kaleidoscope, it is now time to look at the actual change measures that UNHCR has taken.

UNHCR launched a large-scale structural and management reform in 2006 in view of optimizing the organization's effectiveness by shifting to a results-orientation, realigning structures and reducing bureaucracy. The reform efforts include the establishment of a results-based management framework, the downsizing of UNHCR Headquarters in Geneva; and the restructuring of its remaining divisions, the creation of decentralized and regionalized structures, the field review, and a human resources management and training reform.

An analysis of UNHCR's approach to change reveals that it focuses on changing organizational. These measures may decrease UNHCR's administrative costs as a result of a leaner Headquarters and support services closer to the point of delivery resulting in more efficient information networks. However, they do not alter significantly the distribution of power within the organization, the values and assumptions underpinning the unilateral control model and the vertical behavioural processes.

Training and human resources systems

More effective human resources management and training reform may decrease the gap between UNHCR's vertical organizational culture and the emerging horizontal culture of the cluster approach. In terms of training, virtually all policy papers and evaluation reports on the cluster approach conclude that training has crucial importance for adapting staff to the "new way of working" and addressing

performance gaps related to facilitative leadership.[83] Accordingly, the whole UN system has embarked on a large variety of different training activities related to the humanitarian reform and the cluster approach.

On the one hand, one could argue that successful organizational change generally does not start at the level of assumptions, given that these are subconscious, hidden, and difficult to confront. The process is rather the reverse: artefacts and behaviour are changed first, and these in turn affect values, which over time, lead to a change in the basic assumptions.[84] This view assumes that it is easy to introduce change at the surface level.

Providing UNHCR staff enhanced training in the area of facilitative leadership and interpersonal skills appears a promising strategy for gradually increasing their performance within the cluster framework. Moreover, it is likely that UNHCR staff, adapting as a result of training a more horizontal approach in the cluster, will also start making enhanced use of horizontal skills inside UNHCR. This in turn may lead to a significant change in UNHCR's organizational structures, processes, and culture. UNHCR may thus eventually become a flatter and more peer-based organization with higher levels of participation of lower and middle ranks in the organization's decision-making. In sum, the humanitarian reform in the external arena may eventually lead UN agencies to replace vertical assumptions and its resulting hierarchical behaviour with horizontal assumptions and behaviour.

On the other hand, adult learning theories suggest that if there are organizational, policies, or managerial causes behind performance gaps, training is unlikely to solve the problem. This view is based on the assumption that "an organization is not simply an instrumentality for providing organized learning activities to adults; it also provides an environment that either facilitates or inhibits learning".[85] In other words, "just as a teacher's most potent tool is the example of his own behaviour, so an organization's most effective instrument of influence is its own behaviour." An organization must be innovative as well as democratic if it is to provide an environment conducive to learning. Especially when it comes to soft skills, identification and role modelling is a fundamental technique. Learning through imitation seems to be especially appropriate for tasks that have little cognitive structure.[86]

Therefore, formal training is only of limited value as a vehicle for change. The impact of training is limited as long as horizontal skills and attitudes acquired through the learning activity are contradicted by vertical behaviour experienced in their day-to-day work.[87] For example, if a UNHCR staff member is taught in management learning

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[83] See for example EXCOM, Standing Committee 40th Meeting, "Realtime evaluations of UNHCR's involvement in operations for internally displaced persons and the cluster approach: analysis of findings," EC/58/SC/CRP.23, paragraph. 26, 2007

[84] UNHCR Management Learning Programme module on Organizational Culture and Change, p.66, 2007

[85] M.Knowles, E.F.Holton III, R.A.Swanson, "The adult learner," pp.107-108, 2005; C.Argyris and D.Schon, "Organizational Learning: a theory of action perspective," 1978

[86] M.Knowles, E.F.Holton III, R.A.Swanson, "The Adult Learner," 2005, p.103, referring to N.L. Gage, "Teacher Effectiveness and Teacher Education," 1972

[87] B. Wigley, "The State of UNHCR's organization culture," 2004, points out that "while the existence of support in the development of skills through the MLP (Management Learning Programme) is mostly

program to involve their subordinates in decision-making within their section, but their own superiors never involve them in making decisions; they are likely to adopt an autocratic decision-making style compared to a more participative approach.

The risks involved in failing to deliver effective facilitative leadership

If facilitative leadership related hard and soft skills are key UNHCR's performance in the cluster approach, the question arises as to what would be the consequences if UNHCR's change efforts fail to prepare the organization for the horizontal requirements of the changing external environments.

On the one hand, that donor aid financing is dictated mostly by foreign policy and domestic policy interests.[88] While donors regularly call for greater effectiveness of the humanitarian system, in practice they seem more concerned about cost efficiency of structures and measurable outputs rather than quality behavioural processes and impact, which are more difficult to quantify.[89] Accordingly, despite their growing public rhetoric over results and effective performance, most donor funding does not appear to be merit based.[90]

As a result, ineffectiveness and inefficiencies that could result from the "verticalization" of the clusters will not necessarily trigger reduced funding levels as long as the clusters operate. This in turn reduces the pressure to genuinely reform inadequate structures, processes, and organizational culture. This holds all the more true for UNHCR, which is significantly more operational than most of the other UN agencies and thus faces only limited competition from other UN agencies on the operational front. Whether or not a cluster lead agency demonstrates facilitative leadership – internally and externally – may therefore be irrelevant in terms of funding as long as cluster groups are set up and humanitarian partners portray the image of effective coordination.

On the other hand, the humanitarian environment has undoubtedly become a market place where competition between increasing numbers of humanitarian actors will further intensify, inter alia because funding levels will not increase. Funding criteria will be based less on mandated responsibilities and more on presence, past performance and a "service orientation" that denotes "can-do-that-too" attitudes.[91] Only those institutions that have structures and processes in place that allow them to anticipate and respond effectively to rapid change and complexity are likely to

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seen as a positive offering by the organization, many people commented that it is not supported throughout at a senior level, and therefore it becomes confusing and disillusioning when the programme says managers should do things in a certain way and they experience their own managers doing the opposite"

[88] M.Dalton, K. von Hippel, R. Kent, R. Maurer, "Changes in Humanitarian Financing: Implications for the United Nations," p.8, 2003

[89] The humanitarian assistance field lacks a singe, universally accepted definition of "impact". There different levels of impact can be distinguished: "operational impact (achievements)", "initial impact (results)" and "longer term impact (consequences)". Each level of analysis entails a different set of indicators, from process inputs, to outputs and outcomes. C.Hilfiker, "Draft Note on a proposed approach for the cluster evaluation phase II," 2007

[90] I.Smilie and L. Minear, "The quality of money: donor behavior in humanitarian financing," 2003

[91] M.Dalton, K. von Hippel, R. Kent, R. Maurer, "Changes in Humanitarian Financing: Implications for the United Nations," p.40, 2003

succeed in the highly competitive 21st century humanitarian marketplace.[92] Given that UNHCR is almost entirely funded by direct voluntary contributions from governments, non-governmental organizations and individuals, inadequate organization structures, processes and culture as well as ineffective performance in the cluster system may not only run counter its ambitions to become the UN protection agency, but may also lead to reduced funding levels, especially if humanitarian organizations emerge that have successfully developed that are able to respond in an innovative manner to rapid external change and complex crises.

Furthermore, if the UN as a whole fails to deliver facilitative leadership in the framework of the cluster approach and instead "verticalizes" the humanitarian arena based on its traditional vertical values and assumptions, donors are likely to opt for direct funding of non-governmental organizations, instead of channelling funds through the UN. NGOs and other international organizations are also likely to set up alternative coordination. In sum, there is a real risk that UNHCR's failure to respond to change may seriously impact on the agency's long-term future.

A holistic approach to change

As outlined above, a political and structural approach to, in combination with updated training and human resources systems will not be enough to adapt UNHCR's organizational culture to the horizontal process requirements of the external humanitarian environment.

Instead, a holistic approach to change is needed. This approach implies first of all that change is not only viewed from the political and structural angle but also from the cultural and human angle. Under this framework, change is both gap and vision driven. A holistic approach is also based on the premise that in order to succeed a change process needs to be a collective exercise that is owned by all internal and external stakeholders. This ownership implies that senior management demonstrate exactly the same horizontal skills that UNHCR is called upon to use as Cluster Lead in the framework of the Cluster Approach. A participative approach to change also means that senior management demonstrates facilitative rather than directive leadership, and allows middle and lower ranks to become change agents for the change they see necessary for enhancing the effectiveness of the organization.

A holistic approach to change starts with identifying and understanding UNHCR's existing organizational culture- including, its subconscious values and assumptions that reflect the unilateral control model, and that underpin its structures and processes. This understanding could be gained through complementing existing data and information with multiple methods, including organizational culture inventories, culture-gap surveys, and culture interviews with UNHCR staff in small groups.[93] Based on that understanding, it must be assessed how UNHCR's organizational culture fits with the external humanitarian environment and here particularly the horizontal process requirements of the Cluster approach. Such comparison must be

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[92] See H.Mintzberg, "The Structuring of Organisations," in: D.Asch and C.Bowman, "Readings in Strategic Management," 1989.

[93] UNHCR Global Staff Surveys 2006 and 2008; B. Wigley, "The State of UNHCR's organization culture," 2005; B.Wigley, "The State of UNHCR"s organization culture: what now ?," 2006

carried out with the belief that the success of the humanitarian reform depends substantially on the internal reform of humanitarian agencies involved.

UNHCR must decide – based on a genuine internal and external dialogue – what UNHCR's organizational culture should look like, in order to support success in the external humanitarian environment and how the agency's culture must change to support the achievement of that vision.

The success of internal change depends fundamentally on the behavioural support by senior management. To put it differently, horizontal values and assumptions as well as horizontal process behaviour in UNHCR will only succeed if senior management changes their own behaviour and demonstrates facilitative rather than directive leadership in UNHCR's day to day activities. Training of UNHCR staff will start showing impact only if the unconscious assumptions and values of the unilateral control model have been replaced by those underlying the mutual learning model and extrinsic and intrinsic rewards become linked to horizontal skills and attitudes.

Conclusion

The United Nations and UNHCR are in many aspects still a classical bureaucracy. Their tall vertical structures reflect the hierarchical values and assumptions that govern international relations. Realist theory contends that states are the primary actor of international relations and create and control international organizations to pursue their self-interest. These vertical values and assumptions about people and processes are reproduced and perpetuated within UNHCR by unconscious conflicts, emotions and defensive mechanisms at the individual and group level, and contribute to a unilateral control model of management. This has led to an organizational culture of top-down decision-making which sparks sub-optimal behavioural processes inside the agency and cause significant internal efficiency losses.

The Humanitarian Reform Process – specifically the Cluster Approach – marks an attempt to move away from the classical organizational model and increase the effectiveness of the international response to humanitarian emergencies through facilitative leadership, partnership, and horizontal coordination processes. Its underlying horizontal values and assumptions about people, processes and leadership reflect a mutual learning model and imply a high level of participation from the cluster members in the decision-making processes of the cluster groups. This contrasts with the vertical values and assumptions that govern UNHCR's organizational culture and its resulting internal decision-making processes that foresee only a limited degree of participation.

Traditionally, UNHCR has approached coordination challenges in the outside world through directive leadership approaches and hierarchical processes, thus mirroring its vertical values, assumptions, and behaviour in its relations with external partners. Reproducing its internal behavioural processes with partners in the external environment, UNHCR's approach to coordination in the humanitarian environment runs the risk of contradicting the emerging horizontal task culture of inter-agency collaboration, and "verticalizing" the cluster approach together with other UN agencies which face similar organizational challenges.

This paper argues that humanitarian organizations with a tall hierarchy and a vertical organizational culture struggle with applying, in the external arena, facilitative leadership and ensuring effective horizontal coordination with humanitarian partners. Accordingly, UNHCR's involvement as cluster leader in the changing humanitarian environment may lead into two different directions. Either it will gradually transform UNHCR's vertical organizational culture into a more horizontal culture which is likely to lead to flatter organizational structures and a re-design of decision-making and other behavioural processes. Or UNHCR, together with other UN agencies, will "verticalize" the external humanitarian environment by reproducing vertical assumptions, values and processes in the framework of the cluster approach. The latter approach reflects institutional and individual defense mechanisms against a redistribution of power and control within the organization.

UNHCR's current reform efforts focus predominantly on structural changes and have neglected the agency's organizational culture and the resulting vertical behavioural processes. This will not affect UNHCR's institutional survival as long as donor countries only pay attention to structural efficiency gains and outputs. Conversely, once donor countries realize that the success of the humanitarian reform depends on the scope and impact of internal reform of UN agencies such as UNHCR, it is likely that greater attention will be paid to humanitarian organizations' institutional cultures as well as the impact of organizational culture on humanitarian collaboration. Such pressure is likely to increase if organizations or networks of organizations appear on the humanitarian market that have flexible horizontal structures and behavioural processes in place that foster horizontal soft skills and facilitative leadership, and who thus are able to lead effective collaboration in a turbulent humanitarian environment.

In this case, UNHCR will be compelled to adopt a holistic approach to change by complementing structural changes with a thorough diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses of UNHCR's organizational culture. This diagnosis requires an understanding of all UNHCR staff of the organization's traditional values and assumptions, based on a structured and focused dialogue between senior management and lower and middle ranks.

UNHCR needs to define what its organizational culture should look like to support success in the external humanitarian environment. The results of such group dialogue may prompt UNHCR to redefine its underlying values and assumptions, and move from a unilateral control to a mutual learning model, if and when senior managements is prepared to model the change at the highest level. Changing the "soft" characteristics of the organization will imply that UNHCR's "hard" characteristics such as structures and systems will be scrutinized. This may lead to a "de-layering" of UNHCR's tall hierarchy and enhanced delegation of decision-making power to middle and lower ranks. Likewise, human resources and training systems will have to adapt to the revised values and assumptions.

If an absolute king of the Middle Ages were to chair in the 21st century a meeting of one of the humanitarian clusters in a humanitarian emergency, his directive and autocratic approach to leadership and decision-making would run the risk of turning him quickly into the naked king of the "Emperor's New Clothes" tale, provided that the spectators have the will and courage to acknowledge his nakedness. If the Humanitarian Reform and Cluster Approach are to offer a meaningful "new way of working" and increase the effectiveness of humanitarian coordination, all external and

internal stakeholders of the humanitarian reform need to work together to ensure that royal medieval courts are reformed into participative and dynamic learning organizations that are apt to confront the challenges of the 21st century.

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