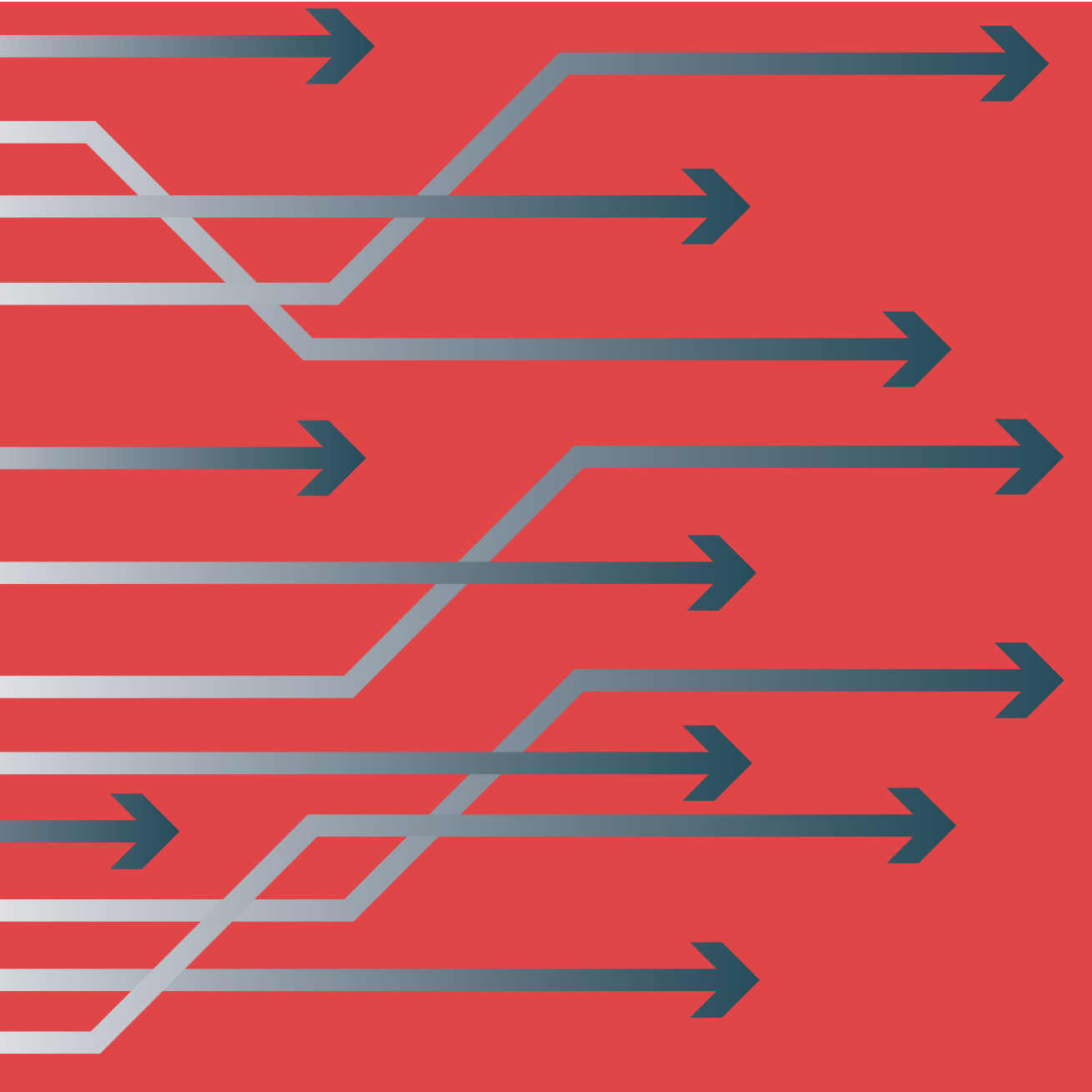# New directions?

Evolving the Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN)

HPN review summary

HPN
Humanitarian
Practice Network

ODI

Cover graphic: Jessica Rennoldson

Background to the Humanitarian Practice Network

The Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN) was established in 1994 as an independent, global forum for humanitarian practitioners, policymakers and others to publish knowledge, analysis and experience. Hosted by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG), but with an independent editorial stance, HPN contributes to improving the performance of humanitarian action by facilitating knowledge-sharing and contributing to individual and institutional learning. HPN publications include the *Humanitarian Exchange* magazine, commissioned subject-specific Network Papers, Good Practice Reviews and opinion pieces; these form the heart of HPN's output, complemented by an active programme of online and in-person events.

To maximise efficiency and minimise costs, for more than 10 years HPN has been run by a lean, part-time team comprising one senior (part-time) HPN Coordinator, supported by HPG's in-house publications and communications capacity.

A review of HPN's purpose and role

Recognising that humanitarian practice has evolved, diversified and decentralised significantly, in 2023, an independent, participatory review of HPN's purpose and role was undertaken. **The overall objective of the review was to examine whether and how HPN should adapt its model, partnerships and approaches in order to take account of the evolving humanitarian ecosystem.**

A three-person team supported by an advisory group made up of ODI and external members undertook surveys, interviews, workshops and discussions to advise on different options for how HPN might support efforts to ensure greater equity in the production of knowledge across the humanitarian ecosystem. Four different models were explored to establish whether and in what ways HPN could go further in amplifying the knowledge of the diverse range of actors engaged in humanitarian research and action.

Overall review findings

HPN's main strengths are its high-quality, trusted and analytical approach; its track record of exploring emerging, new or even controversial topics; its accessible and mixed formats; and its personal and supportive approach. Few platforms exist where diverse practitioners are supported to publish their views and experiences for a global audience.

While HPN has significant influence within the 'international' system, there are significant areas of the sector where HPN remains unknown particularly amongst national and local humanitarian actors. The review found that it is important in the next phase of HPN's development to 'double down' on diversity of partnerships and the development of the principles underpinning local and national knowledge production and practice; areas which until now, HPN has neither had the resources nor the time to invest in. There is a need to expand both HPN's reach and the diversity of its approaches and languages.

A reinvigorated HPN purpose

Drawing on external feedback and discussions within HPN and HPG, the review established a revised purpose for HPN:

> To be an independent, networked and accessible platform for exchange, debate and learning for all practitioners engaged in humanitarian action.

> HPN connects humanitarian practitioners with new evidence, learning and debates. It provides a forum to share emerging practice and to connect practitioners with policy development and academic research. It deliberately seeks to reflect the diversity of viewpoints, experiences and practice across the humanitarian ecosystem.

Evolving HPN's model – a partnership model

The review considered four different future models for HPN. Each involve a significant uplift in resource and capacity, and range from continuing the current model but with a greater focus on national action, to devolving HPN and embedding it in local networks.

The model proposed by the review, and adopted by the HPN Review Advisory Group is to shift HPN to a partnership model. This model is based on the further development of a network of diverse consortia, organisations and individuals with responsibilities for representing and supporting HPN close to humanitarian action. Members of the network will provide input, ideas and proposals for supporting the improvement of humanitarian action by encouraging and facilitating decentralised knowledge-sharing. The review recognised that, once established and with sufficient resources and capacity, this partnership model could evolve further to a more decentralised model (which was one of the options explored).

A brief outline of the model is provided below.

Key elements

- Develop a decentralised partnership-based network made up of 'representative network members' to mobilise, engage and gather diverse views and contributions to HPN publications, which would lead to a more vocal and inclusive HPN.
- Increase diversity of outputs. Outputs would be more diverse with a focus on the development of products to prompt active online debate, and with increased engagement and 'ownership' by partners and network members of HPN's direction, themes and products.
- Recruit a new HPN Partnership Coordinator. Current HPN Coordinator role to be succeeded by an HPN Partnership Coordinator who will develop long-term partnerships and collaborative relationships with regional, national and local humanitarian networks in key humanitarian locations.

- Establish an HPN Advisory Group of representative network members to assist in the identification of key themes and outreach to authors.
- Maintain support from HPG publications and communications functions. The central HPG team will continue to edit and disseminate HPN written products.
- Pay more attention to contextualising information-gathering methods to encourage the engagement of diverse practitioners and local and national actors.
- Use communication platforms and channels that are relevant to different regions and contexts.

Structure, capacity and resourcing

- Aim for a networked structure led by an HPN Partnership Coordinator, recruited globally, and supported by a small team of approximately two support staff (increase capacity from 0.75 to 3.00 full-time employees).
- Maintain relationship with HPG. HPG provide editorial, production, translation and communications support (increase support in short–medium term).
- Formalise partnership relationships with networks, organisations and individuals representing HPN.
- Develop a light-touch governance structure (HPN Advisory Group) to ensure that partners have input into the strategic direction and performance of HPN.
- Increase resources to support capacity and evolved communications support.