

Has Covid-19 changed humanitarian training forever?

by Jeanette Dyson

Necessity might be the mother of invention. But reinvention has certainly proved necessary over the past 18 months as the humanitarian and emergency response sector has fought to find new ways of training its workforce.

In 2020, COVID restrictions put a complete stop to on-site training across the globe, with most aid organisations and networks forced to rip up their calendar plans and return to the drawing board. Graver still, the pandemic created new operational challenges for aid agencies throughout the world.

“At a time when the need for learning grew to unforeseen levels, the aid sector found itself completely unable to turn to face-to-face workshops, courses and exercises: the tools that have dominated the training landscape since the birth of our profession,” said Rich Parker, Training in Aid Founder.

A new way of training teams

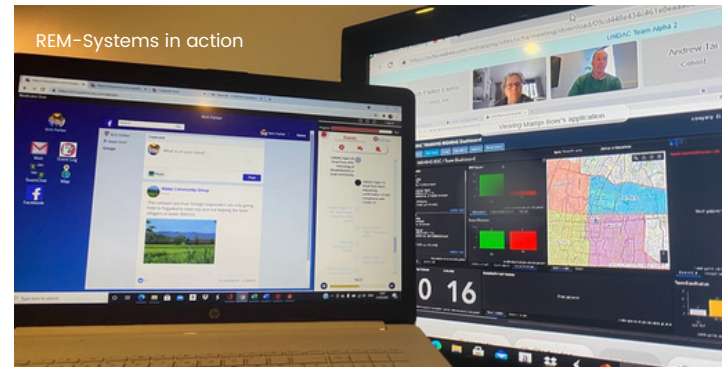
Faced with necessity, the industry evolved.

Discussion rapidly turned towards building better online solutions that could ensure learning continuity by enabling emergency response staff to access training from their place of lockdown.

One major gap identified during the early days of the pandemic was the ability to bring people together in team-based simulations using real-life operational scenarios. Virtual exercises combining technology and live human interaction were established as a temporary alternative to face-to-face settings.

Training In Aid's own approach, known as REM-Systems, hoped to be an early change agent and has since helped more than 40 organisations worldwide provide teams with effective remote training. Other approaches and providers soon followed. Now valuable simulation experiences for aid organisation staff are available in vital skill areas such as coordination, team effectiveness and critical decision making.

“It has been a steep learning curve,” said Rich. “The recent Humanitarian Networks and Partnership Week, organised by OCHA, identified virtual simulations as a priority area of focus and work is well underway to establishing guidance and recommendations for those keen to learn more.”



A long-awaited change

One important question as we look to the future is whether or not this evolution was long overdue.

As restrictions ease – at least within countries and some regions – will we see a complete return to pre-COVID ways?

Or has the pandemic response led us to useful progress that might be taken forward? Can we embrace a new way of working, not just as a contingency in case of future periods of lockdown but as an entity in its own right?

Certainly, on-site training is not without its historical critics. High costs of travel, logistical challenges and carbon emissions were often cited as unresolved issues long before the pandemic forced us to address them.

And then there were the challenges of how humanitarian training might play a stronger role in empowering the localisation agenda. How might training reach greater numbers of frontline responders than ever before, while ensuring quality standards and coherence across an increasingly connected, globalized learning community?

These challenges have not disappeared, and will no doubt rise again in the months to come as HR-finance departments urge us towards further introspection and cost-benefit analysis.

A brighter future?

It could be that we are emerging from the global pandemic into a brighter and better world for humanitarian training.

In particular, perhaps there is an opportunity to reclaim the dialogue around the future of emergency response exercises and find new ways to combine the undisputed strengths of the face-to-face simulation with the multiplying impact offered by virtual technologies.



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In our next blog we will introduce a newly-formed spectrum of options for aid partners seeking to navigate the space of integrated simulations and those looking for greater certainty in their exercise planning calendars.

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