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Can rigorous impact evaluations improve humanitarian assistance?¹

Background

In 2016, humanitarian crises directly affected an estimated 164.2 million people worldwide. While the international community responded by raising USD 27.3 billion in funding, 40 per cent of the needs identified by the United Nations were unmet. In a context where lives are in danger and the demand for resources overwhelmingly exceeds supply, effective and efficient assistance and service delivery are key factors. However, despite the countless ex-post evaluations conducted in the humanitarian sector, there is a shortage of theory-based, reliable evidence causally linking interventions to relevant outcomes.

The paper summarized in this brief examines if and how impact evaluation methods can provide reliable evidence to improve the quality and delivery of humanitarian aid. The paper argues that providing reliable evidence requires evaluations to determine if humanitarian interventions are reaching the right people at the right time, distributing the intended benefits to the targeted recipients and delivering the appropriate amount of assistance cost-efficiently.

Types of humanitarian crises and actions

Humanitarian crises are characterized by an exceptional and generalized threat to human life, health or subsistence. Crises may appear where a natural disaster or armed conflict exacerbates pre-existing conditions (e.g. inequality, poverty or limited community services). **Humanitarian actions** are generally regarded as either (i) short term responses that are distinct from development aid by focusing on saving lives and alleviating suffering during and immediately following an emergency and (ii) long-term responses to slow-onset, complex emergencies requiring more development-oriented aid to sustain human health, life and livelihoods while building

recovery and resilience. The paper's analysis is relevant to both types of actions.

The challenges in measuring impact

Only 38 existing studies met the paper's criteria for measuring attributable changes in humanitarian action outcomes and impacts. This shortfall partly reflects the challenges that evaluations also face in the case of a humanitarian crisis, including disruptions to everyday life, security concerns, finding a valid counterfactual, scant or no baseline data and ethical implications in collecting data. The lack of impact evaluation experts in the humanitarian sector accentuates these challenges. The key challenges that impact evaluations encounter and the subsequent solutions addressed in the paper include ethical, methodological and practical challenges.

Ethical challenges

Ethics are vital when conducting impact evaluations of humanitarian assistance, especially if defining a control or a comparison group means withholding aid for this group. This may be unacceptable in an emergency.

Methodological challenges

Selection bias may occur on three counts in humanitarian crises. Poor, marginalized households may (i) suffer greater shock (e.g. by living closer to a flooded river), (ii) suffer more damage and destruction (e.g. due to lower quality housing) and (iii) lack influence in accessing disaster relief. This creates a 'triple' selection bias that threatens the evaluation's internal validity.

Information bias occurs when poverty, education and relief programme eligibility affect the accuracy of the information respondents provide. During a crisis, respondents may not accurately recall their pre-emergency living conditions. Also, recall errors may

¹ The citation for the publication discussed in this brief is: Putri, Jyotsna and others Can rigorous impact evaluations improve humanitarian assistance? *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, 9:4, 519-542 Available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19439342.2017.1388267>

be compounded if relief beneficiaries think their answers will affect their compensation.

Contamination bias occurs if relief spills over to non-targeted areas of an agency's aid efforts, thus affecting the evaluation's control group.

Practical challenges

Impact evaluations are harder to implement during humanitarian emergencies. Practical challenges to impact evaluations in humanitarian contexts include dealing with different phases of the humanitarian response (e.g. preventative, emergency, resilience-building), responding to the need for urgency, identifying the multiplicity of actors, finding credible counterfactuals, and attributing impact among different players.

Addressing evaluation challenges

The paper argues that impact evaluation can address these challenges to distil lessons on delivering humanitarian aid effectively. The approaches it suggests include adjusting research designs to suit programme and ground realities and the creative use of factorial designs where ethical principles are not compromised and not all delivery aims can be achieved simultaneously.

Conclusions

The paper posits that using impact evaluation methodologies may help to (i) understand impact and assess programme designs that might best suit different humanitarian contexts and (ii) identify delivery methods best suited to the different humanitarian assistance phases and the disaster's context. Scope exists for improving practice in the humanitarian sector through learning based on impact evaluations.

Given the complexity of emergency humanitarian environments and the above-mentioned challenges that impact evaluations face, it is often assumed theory-based impact evaluation methods are not applicable in such contexts. This helps explain the scarcity of high-quality studies on humanitarian assistance. The paper argues, however, that impact evaluations can add value without compromising

ethical principles regarding the logistics, organization and content of humanitarian assistance: factorial designs can indicate the delivery mode of value to humanitarian organizations, donors and recipients.

Theory-based impact evaluation can help generalize lessons because the analysis will uncover why something did or did not work and for whom. But theory-based evaluations of humanitarian emergencies require solid investment in advanced preparation. Considerable information is increasingly available about the risks of various emergencies, whether sudden or slow onset.

Hence, national actors and international donors can prepare on three fronts: they can (i) study where emergencies may unfold and assistance may be required, (ii) plan and be prepared to intervene when an emergency unfolds (including strengthening local resilience *ex-ante*) and (iii) prepare evaluation designs in advance, drawing on insights into how to conduct successful impact evaluations offered in the paper and the topic's emerging literature.

Being prepared to conduct rigorous impact evaluations requires building capacity at the national and local levels and securing buy-in from donors – while accepting impact evaluations cannot answer all donor questions. They are less useful for fast learning about improving an ongoing intervention, even as implementing an impact evaluation can itself be a valuable learning experience. Nevertheless, given the lack of rigorous causal evidence of what works in the humanitarian sector, there is a reward in conducting more impact evaluations in emergency settings and a loss in not doing so.

The paper concludes that with a better-informed appreciation of the need, rationale and feasibility of impact evaluation in emergency settings, and with a growing evidence base of methods and techniques employed in such contexts, the prevalence of impact evaluations in the humanitarian sector will increase significantly in the years ahead.



Women distribute rations in Haiti following a hurricane. Impact evaluation methodologies can help improve the understanding and delivery of humanitarian aid. Big Stock: 3876095 © David Snyder