INSUFFICIENT EVIDENCE?
The quality and use of evidence in humanitarian action
Paul Knox Clarke and James Darcy
DISCUSSION STARTER

You can download a full version of the ALNAP Study INSUFFICIENT EVIDENCE? The quality and use of evidence in humanitarian action from the ALNAP website: www.alnap.org/ourwork/evidence.
WHAT IS ‘EVIDENCE’?

In this paper, we define evidence as information that helps to prove or to disprove a specific proposition.

- Most evidence collected by international humanitarian organisations relates to one of two broad propositions:
  - PROPOSITION A: That a situation of humanitarian need exists, which requires external assistance.
  - PROPOSITION B: That certain actions will be – or were – effective in addressing humanitarian needs.

- Many different sorts of information are used as evidence to prove or disprove these propositions.

HOW GOOD IS THE EVIDENCE THAT IS CURRENTLY AVAILABLE?

- It can be difficult to gather good quality evidence in an emergency: availability of secondary data; constraints to access for information collection; short timescales; political concerns; and important ethical considerations to be taken into account.

- Evidence is required at different phases in the programme cycle. Each different phase presents its own challenges:
  i. The key evidential challenge in early warnings is selecting relevant indicators that can forecast conditions reliably, particularly where early warning addresses crises (like famines) that are the result of many factors interacting over time.
  ii. Assessments use a wide variety of methods and approaches. This, and the fact that assessments are seldom “independent”, leads to questions about quality: particularly accuracy and representativeness.

  i. The humanitarian system is poor at monitoring situations over time, and very little evidence of this type is collected. More work is done around monitoring performance of humanitarian agencies. However, this information is not always accurate or representative, and often focuses on outputs, not outcomes so may not be relevant to the most important questions.
  ii. Evaluations, in addition to challenges related to accuracy and to representativeness, also have to demonstrate attribution: they are often weak in this area. Where evaluations are used as the basis of policy development, humanitarians also need to pay attention to issues of generalisability.

  There is a lack of clarity around methods, ownership and purpose at all phases of the programme cycle.

HOW CAN WE JUDGE THE QUALITY OF EVIDENCE?

This report uses six criteria to judge the quality of evidence that is generated and used in humanitarian action:

- ACCURACY
  Whether the evidence is a good reflection of the real situation, and is a “true” record of the thing being measured.

- REPRESENTATIVENESS
  The degree to which the evidence (often from a specific place or group) accurately represents the condition of the larger group of interest.

- RELEVANCE
  The degree to which a piece of information relates to the proposition that it is intended to prove or disprove.

- GENERALISABILITY
  The degree to which evidence from a specific situation can be generalised beyond that response to other situations (particularly important where evidence from one situation is used to create policies applicable to other situations).

- ATTRIBUTION
  Whether the analysis demonstrates a clear and unambiguous causal linkage between two conditions or events (particularly important for evaluations, which aim to show the results of an action or programme).

- CLARITY AROUND CONTEXT AND METHODS
  The degree to which it is clear how, why and for whom evidence has been collected.

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF EVIDENCE?

- Using more robust methodologies for analysis and collection: using tried and tested approaches from the social sciences for qualitative work, and continuing to explore the possibilities for quantitative and mixed methods approaches.
- Proportionate investment: ensuring that investments in evidence match the importance of the questions addressed.
- Increased collaboration: working together to identify key questions; decreasing unnecessary duplication; and sharing and challenging results.
- Thinking of the longer term: collecting consistent data sets over time.
- Including the knowledge of people affected by crises – and answering the questions that they need answered.

WHAT WILL ALNAP DO?

THE NETWORK WILL:

- Introduce guidance to assist members to improve the evidential quality of evaluations.
- Continue work (through the Evaluation Community of Practice) to improve the use of evaluations.
- Continue to update and refine the ALNAP resources library: ensuring that it contains the largest collection of documents related to humanitarian action, and is easy to search.
- Continue to experiment with a variety of approaches, including qualitative approaches and structured reviews, in our research.
- Work to better understand decision-making processes and risk/uncertainty avoidance.

DOES EVIDENCE GET USED BY DECISION-MAKERS?

- Evidence, by itself, does not make decisions. In most cases, decision-makers will need to balance a variety of different types of evidence, pointing to different conclusions, before making a decision.
- BUT decision-makers should attempt to use the best evidence available to inform their decisions.
- Currently, the use of evidence is inconsistent, and evidence does not always translate into action, particularly if it goes against accepted wisdom / practice, or is hard to implement.
- Constraints to the use of evidence include: biases on the part of decision-makers; lack of access to evidence; unclear decision-making processes; and inflexible procedures that make it very difficult to change programmes, even when evidence suggests changes are required.

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE THE USE OF EVIDENCE?

- Ensure that evidence is accessible, and is presented in a format which allows decision-makers to find relevant evidence and arguments easily.
- Ensure that evidence is made available in a timely fashion: before decisions are made.
- Attempt to make evidence and arguments well known by decision-makers to update and refine decisions. In most cases, decision-making is a process: ensure that there are different media to different groups.