

Mapping Evidence Syntheses in the Humanitarian Sector: Insights and Challenges

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This memorandum accompanies a catalog of existing systematic and literature reviews in the humanitarian sector and discusses the methodological approach to this exercise. The purpose of this study was three-fold: (a) to identify gaps in the existing humanitarian evidence base, which have informed the development of targeted research questions for evidence syntheses as part of the Humanitarian Evidence Program; (b) to inform program staff and stakeholders of existing evidence syntheses efforts in the humanitarian field, in order to improve intra-field learning; (c) to avoid duplicating existing evidence synthesis efforts in the commissioning of future program outputs.

The Humanitarian Evidence Program aims to synthesize research in the humanitarian sector and communicate the findings to key stakeholders, including policymakers, practitioners and researchers, with the ultimate goal of improving humanitarian policy and practice. The program is a DFID-funded partnership between Oxfam GB and the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University (FIC). More information is available on the Oxfam GB and FIC program websites.

Approach to cataloging existing humanitarian evidence syntheses:

During the first stage of the mapping exercise, the team defined guidelines for cataloging existing reviews that were published from 2009 through the present and focused specifically on the humanitarian context. Only reviews after 2009 were included in order to narrow the scope and capture research in the five years that preceded the start of the Humanitarian Evidence Program. Future exercises to catalog humanitarian evidence syntheses can expand this time span. Both ongoing and completed reviews were included in the catalog.

The main sources consulted include DFID's list of systematic reviews in international development (in R4D: Research for Development), Evidence Aid, 3ie's systematic reviews database, and The Campbell Collaboration Systematic Reviews Database. Based on the Humanitarian Evidence Program's Terms of Reference, existing organizations mapped by the Program as key stakeholders in the humanitarian sector, and additional targeted research, other sources for reviews were identified and cataloged. A complete list of the sources consulted throughout the cataloging process can be found in Annex 1.

While there are many systematic and literature reviews in the international development sector, the purpose of this exercise was to focus on reviews either specifically addressing humanitarian contexts, or reviews which could be applicable and relevant in the humanitarian community. Given the dearth of existing reviews in this sector overall, reviews on international development topics that could also inform humanitarian evidence syntheses were included, with a note clarifying that they are more development-oriented in the database. The database was also organized by relevance; any reviews that are not directly focused on humanitarian issues but which were also deemed as potentially

¹ Cite as: Kristin Bushby, Roxanne Krystalli, "Mapping Evidence Syntheses in the Humanitarian Sector: Insights and Challenges," Feinstein International Center – Oxfam GB, April 2015. The project of mapping reviews in the humanitarian field benefitted from feedback from Elizabeth Stites, Ellie Ott, Jeannie Annan, Anjali Shivshanker, Tarah Friend, and Phil Davies. The program also thanks members of its Advisory Board, as well as key informants who participated in conversations about humanitarian evidence.

relevant to humanitarian contexts are sorted at the bottom of the spreadsheet. Separate resources exist or are under development to address reviews in international development, including but not limited to 3ie's gap maps, and catalogs by The Campbell Collaboration, Evidence Aid and others.

For each review, the program team recorded the following information: title; sector; population, intervention, and context of review; organization undertaking review; organization funding and/or commissioning review; key researchers; dates of review; type of review; key questions addressed; and other relevant information pertinent for this exercise.

On the aggregate level, this mapping exercise revealed a diverse array of evidence, including evidence of the effectiveness of interventions on specific outcomes; program implementation; the efficacy of programs targeting vulnerable populations; information that describes the context of interventions, outcomes, or program implementation; and reviews that describe a problem (prevalence/incidence studies). While this demonstrates the broad range of evidence within systematic or literature reviews in the humanitarian sector, additional disaggregation based on these categories was not included. This was due to the fact that the focus of this exercise was to identify the topics of all relevant evidence syntheses after 2009 – whether those were focused on interventions, effectiveness, or outcomes. By making the data of this scoping assessment available, the program encourages future databases and research projects on the humanitarian evidence base to add additional parameters of disaggregation, which could ultimately provide insight on the broader relationships between interventions, context, and outcomes in the humanitarian sector.

Limitations and challenges

- There are divergent definitions, standards, and expectations for what constitutes a systematic and/or literature review, based on the organizations sponsoring or conducting the reviews. In some cases, the reviews are called systematic reviews, meta-analyses, adapted systematic reviews, rigorous literature reviews, or literature reviews. Examining the methodology for these reviews more closely reveals a blend of various levels of quality and types of review. Relatedly, the existence of different categories or labels of reviews (e.g. “good practice” reviews) and outputs that are not reviews but which may inform evidence synthesis efforts (e.g. scoping assessments) complicates the determination of which outputs merit inclusion in this mapping exercise.
- Only reviews with an explicit humanitarian angle or with clear reference and applicability to the humanitarian sector were included in this initial search. It is possible that there are applicable insights about humanitarian evidence in reviews in other fields (nutrition, health) and in contexts that transcend humanitarian settings.
- Classification of items into thematic sectors was done based on keywords identified in the reviews and the abstracts. However, there is a chance that other thematic areas were covered in existing reviews, but not featured as prominently in the abstracts or keywords sections.
- While every attempt was made to be inclusive and search the evidence base of major humanitarian actors and evidence synthesis networks, it is possible that there are other existing syntheses commissioned by other organizations that are not included in major databases or that are not publicly available without specific subscriptions to journals or online networks.

Annex 1: Sources Consulted During Cataloging Process

- DFID Systematic Review Website (R4D)
- DFID Strategy Paper, “Promoting innovation and evidence-based approaches to building resilience and responding to humanitarian crises”
- International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) database on systematic reviews in international development
- Oxfam
- Overseas Development Institute/Humanitarian Practice Network
- EPPI Centre
- Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
- Evidence Aid
- Cochrane Reviews (Accessed via Evidence Aid’s database)
- Campbell Collaboration Systematic Review Database
- U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, Research Projects to Strengthen Evidence-Based Humanitarian Decision Making
- Christian Aid
- Humanitarian and Development Network
- InterAction
- Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium
- Enhanced Learning and Research for Humanitarian Assistance
- International Association of Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection
- Humanitarian Accountability Partnership
- The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance
- The Network on Humanitarian Assistance
- The World Bank
- Program on Evaluation and Implementation Science, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative
- Humanitarian Social Network/AidSource
- Humanitarian Innovation Project
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
- European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department
- International Network for Education in Emergencies
- Google Scholar