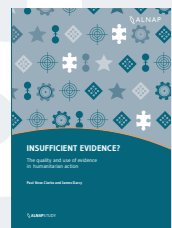


# INSUFFICIENT EVIDENCE?

The quality and use of evidence  
in humanitarian action

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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](http://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:
    - The key evidential challenge in **early warning** 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.
    - 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.



# HOW CAN WE IMPROVE THE USE OF EVIDENCE?

Individuals and organisations producing evidence can:

- 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 dissemination through a variety of different media to different groups.



# 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.

Decision-makers and humanitarian organisations can:

- Clarify their decision-making processes: ensure that there are explicit requirements for evidence at certain points in the process.
- Explicitly consider their attitude to risk and to risk-taking: incentivise the use of evidence in decision-making.
- Adopt iterative approaches to programming and allow programmes to change on the basis of new evidence.