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1 The need for evidence-based programming in humanitarian action

Liesbet Heyse, Andrej Zwitter, Rafael Wittek and Joost Herman

Ongoing challenges to provide impactful humanitarian aid

The field of humanitarian action continues to struggle with the challenge to conduct impactful humanitarian aid interventions. In part, this is because humanitarian action as a professional field cannot build on generalizable principles, large-scale datasets and case studies to provide one-size-fits-all intervention strategies. Rather, aid organizations have to design their interventions every time to fit the conditions and circumstances of an area with its cultural, political, economic, health and environmental specificities.

That these challenges persist, has been made painfully evident again with the Haiti earthquake. After the earthquake in 2010, Haiti experienced a massive influx of a variety of humanitarian and military actors. Due to the fact that the country's infrastructure was almost totally destroyed, the logistical side of humanitarian aid provision presented a tremendous challenge to the sector. However, this was not the only problem faced by humanitarian actors. Evaluations of the Haiti aid operations pointed at recurrent 'classic' flaws in the aid activities (CARE/Save the Children 2010, Patrick 2011). For example, many emergency products such as bottled water and medicines were imported and freely distributed while they were locally available. The influx of free goods in the local economy resulted in local businesses having to shut down, thereby further weakening the already weak economic infrastructure of the country. Evaluators attributed this mistake to a lack of contextual understanding (CARE/Save the Children 2010: 30).

Also, information was lacking with regard to targeted food distributions; there was no documentation that outlined community information strategies or any orientation for staff involved (CARE/Save the Children 2010). In addition, the quality of targeting and level of coverage was criticized. This problem was deemed to be due to a lack of available data and regular profiling of the population (Patrick 2011). All in all, as an OECD synthesis of evaluation reports summarized:

Largely unfamiliar with humanitarian natural disasters in urban areas and compounded by poor contextual understanding of Haiti's society and economy and of the capacity of key stakeholders, the humanitarian

community's reaction was a classical response: self contained, working outside government systems and reliant on imported material and personnel, supporting displaced individuals in internally displaced persons camps with food and non-food assistance.

(Patrick 2011: 4)

The Haiti earthquake showed that the humanitarian sector is confronted with a persistent challenge to provide impactful aid. One important explanation for the persistence of this challenge is, as suggested by the above evaluators, the lack of analysis of humanitarian crisis situations and the use of these analyses in humanitarian work. This lack of understanding of the context can also hamper the design of appropriate risk management measures in humanitarian projects. In addition, lack of analysis and correct use of information can lead to 'classical mistakes' which seriously affect the outcomes of humanitarian aid operations and can even lead to more harm than good, as not only the Haiti earthquake but other humanitarian crises have shown. For example, also after the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake, subsequent Tsunami evaluators stated that ineffective and inappropriate recovery programs were implemented due to a lack of awareness of the context at both the individual and institutional level (TEC 2006). This book focuses on ways to improve the use of information and analysis in humanitarian programming.

Humanitarian mission versus humanitarian reality

The core mission of humanitarian organizations is to save lives at risk and to relieve suffering of victims of 'man-made' or 'natural disasters' by providing high quality aid to those who need it most (Barnett and Weiss 2008). In its classic meaning, humanitarian aid is focused on the immediate aftermath of a crisis, conflict or disaster, which is then followed by phases of reconstruction, rehabilitation and development. However, given the increased acknowledgement of the structural causes of humanitarian crises – in terms of lack of preparedness, prevention and resilience (see also Chapter 2) – humanitarian aid projects also often have elements of prevention, risk reduction and 'building back better' (Fan 2013). In this book, we therefore adhere to this more extended interpretation of humanitarian aid.

Humanitarian aid requires the swift and correct identification and diagnosis of humanitarian problems and groups in need, next to decisions whether to start providing aid and, if so, whom to help, where, when and how. In addition, it requires a thorough risk assessment in order to assure that aid can be delivered safely. Once an aid project is started, it requires continuous monitoring of project activities, the context as well as the risk management strategies, in order to assure quality and safe access, and adapt activities when necessary. The humanitarian programming process in the sector is therefore often presented in terms of a project management cycle, referring to a step-wise process of identifying and formulating programming activities, planning and implementing activities,

monitoring and evaluating them, as well as adapting activities when necessary (see for example, ECHO 2005 and ICRC 2011). These activities are employed with the aim – at the minimum – to prevent that no harm is done (Anderson 1999). The ambition of humanitarian aid providers is however much higher, namely to provide high quality aid that has impact, is appropriate, effective, sustainable and efficient, and meets all kinds of other quality criteria such as for example outlined in the Sphere standards.

In the past decades the sector has worked hard to get closer to meeting these ambitions. During and after the humanitarian operations in the 1990s (Rwanda, Somalia, Kosovo), the sector was criticized extensively for its lacking performance and the unintended, harmful consequences of its actions (Sommer 1994, Whitman and Pocock 1996). The sector was called to increase accountability and transparency, to professionalize its operations and to improve coordination (Edwards and Hulme 1996, Brown and Moore 2001, Choudhury and Ahmed 2002). This led to many initiatives, such as the Sphere project, the Cluster approach, the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative, the founding of ALNAP and ELHRA, and increased attention to Operational Security Management (HPN/ODI 2010). In addition, aid workers started to regularly follow training and obtained academic degrees in humanitarian action.¹ Furthermore, scholarly attention to the work and functioning of humanitarian organizations has grown tremendously.²

As a result of these initiatives, much has been learned about and done to improve the sector's performance, with positive results (de Waal 2010). To name a few: there is now increased recognition of the importance of involving local actors and staff in humanitarian programming, implementation and evaluation (see, for example, ALNAP 2003, Barry and Barham 2012), next to increased awareness of the importance of applying coherent and comprehensive approaches to humanitarian crises (Cahill 2007), as represented in the UN cluster approach, or attention to disaster risk reduction and resilience (Twigg 2004) and the link between relief, rehabilitation and development (International Review of the Red Cross 2011). Also, systematic approaches to security risk management for maintaining access have become mainstream, such as reflected in the *Saving Lives Together* recommendations of the IASC Steering Group on Security (2011) and the UN *To Stay and Deliver* document (OCHA 2011).

Nevertheless, the humanitarian mission to relieve suffering by providing high quality aid in an effective, appropriate and impactful way remains an ongoing challenge. This is partly due to the context in which humanitarian organizations' work is done, which is – maybe more than ever – characterized by complexity and constant and rapid change. This context presents humanitarian actors with multiple challenges in terms of access, security, political and cultural constraints, and issues of funding and staffing. For example, governmental donors increasingly view humanitarian assistance as part of a larger military strategy aimed at international stability and defense, which has created a complex relationship between humanitarian organizations and the military (ALNAP 2012a). Also, funding has become more dependent on these strategic interests. Furthermore,

humanitarian aid workers continue to face risks of being wounded, murdered or taken hostage (see, for example, the Aid Worker Security Database at www.aid-workersecurity.org) whereas at the same time humanitarian organizations are frequently obstructed by political actors (ICRC 2012) or need to engage with a complex set of other actors, such as private development companies, security providers and infrastructure providers.

Nevertheless, the difficult context of aid provision is not the only cause for problematic aid provision. The organizations themselves also do not live up to the expectations at all times. As the Haiti example shows, humanitarian organizations make (repetitive) mistakes in their programming. These are partly deemed to be the result of standardized and supply-driven responses to humanitarian crisis and the lacking use of information and analysis (Bradt 2009, Darcy 2009). This has not only been the conclusion of evaluations of major humanitarian responses, such as after the Tsunami (2005) and the Haiti earthquake (2010), but is also subject of a steady stream of professional and academic publications (see, for example, Coyne 2013, Levine *et al.* 2011, Donahue and Tuohy 2007). The use of seeds and tools programs in humanitarian aid illustrates this point. Such programs can be a suitable response when targeted households do not have access to seeds and tools, when there is a lack of good quality seeds and tools, and this lack negatively impacts production (Maxwell *et al.* 2008). However, humanitarian seeds and tools programs are implemented in situations that do not meet these conditions (Levine and Chastre 2004), resulting in adverse effects, as has been painfully illustrated for the case of Caluquembe in Angola: seeds programs promoted maize and beans production, which resulted in a monoculture, inducing low prices on the market and heavy reliance on a single source of income, leaving households extremely vulnerable to shocks (Van Dijkhorst 2011). So, it is one problem if humanitarian aid is not as effective as one would hope it would be, but yet another if aid leads to harm and deterioration of people's lives.

The humanitarian sector is thus facing a continuous challenge to improve its performance and reduce (repetitive) mistakes in an ever increasing complex environment. This challenge needs to be addressed as part of the sector's duty to be accountable, not only to their donors and the general public, but also – and especially – to the aid recipients. This book aims to contribute to address this challenge by focusing on one particular aspect of humanitarian programming: tools and methods to improve information collection, processing and analysis in designing humanitarian aid projects in all phases of the project management cycle.

Using evidence in programming

Information collection, processing and analysis are key to successful and impactful humanitarian programming, but are often lacking in humanitarian programming (Maxwell *et al.* 2013a, Levine *et al.* 2011, Darcy 2009, Haan *et al.* 2005). Without information and the proper analysis of it, it is impossible to make

informed decisions about humanitarian aid and how to deliver it safely. However, not all information is equally relevant. Particular types of information especially contribute to better humanitarian programming, as is nicely illustrated in the OECD Haiti evaluation synthesis:

Largely missing from these assessments ... were *contextual analyses* (particularly on political and economic issues) and *capacity assessments of Haitian stakeholders* (most notably the Haitian government) which would have allowed the humanitarian community a greater understanding of Haitian social and political dynamics and of the capacities of their natural Haitian partners across government and civil society to engage with and even lead recovery. Compounding these gaps in analysis, *valuable studies and assessments conducted by Haitians themselves were largely ignored.*
(Patrick 2011: 3)

Hence, one way to address the persistent need for improved programming is by means of better, correct and increased use of relevant information in humanitarian planning and programming.

We specify the distinction between information and relevant information in the humanitarian sector with the term 'evidence' (Bradt 2009, ALNAP 2012b, Darcy and Knox 2013). This term originates from medical research in which evidence-based medicine is often practiced, referring to a highly specialized method based on quantitative methods, the use of baseline data and randomized controlled trials (RCTs) to test what medicines work for whom and how (Bradt 2009). In the humanitarian sector, the term 'evidence' is also used, but in a much broader and looser way, and for good reasons. One of such reasons is that it is not possible, or ethical, to work with control groups in humanitarian crises (not receiving any aid). Hence the impact of aid provision cannot be measured by means of RCTs. Second, both quantitative and qualitative methods can be useful and necessary to generate evidence. Moreover, in some crisis contexts only small-scale qualitative data collection might be possible, due to access or security problems. The meaning of 'evidence' for the humanitarian sector is therefore not as restricted to the definition used in medicine, as the following definition by ALNAP clearly shows: 'Evidence is true or credible information (quantitative and qualitative) that helps demonstrate the truth or falsehood of a given proposition' (ALNAP 2012b: 4).

In the humanitarian context, the term 'proposition', as mentioned in the above definition, refers to questions about (1) the existence of an actual or potential crisis, (2) 'what works' in preventing or mitigating crisis and (3) what is the most appropriate response (ALNAP 2012b, Darcy and Knox 2013). In other words, evidence in humanitarian action is required to answer two basic questions. First, a *diagnostic question*, referring to a thorough problem analysis, analyzing the symptoms of the crisis, the context in which it is taking place as well as the causes leading to the crisis. Which antecedents and mechanisms led to the crisis or emergency? How are these factors interrelated? Information from needs

assessments, early warning exercises or situational reports often feed into this situational analysis (cf. Maxwell *et al.* 2013b, Darcy 2009). Second, there is the *intervention question* which refers to a thorough analysis of the proposed intervention. Given the diagnosis, what are suitable, feasible and safe options to intervene in a specific context? This requires a creative process – also referred to as response analysis (Maxwell *et al.* 2013a, 2013b, Darcy 2009) – in which one generates well-reasoned and substantiated arguments and evidence as to why certain interventions can be assumed to result in positive effects, both in the short and the long term. Evidence from the diagnostic analysis and previous interventions (evaluations, lessons learned exercises) is of importance in this reasoning process, next to information on the stakeholder field.

The depth and frequency with which one attempts to answer these questions may differ: in the initial emergency response phase this may have to be based on limited evidence, but as suggested in the project management cycle, program design and implementation should include continuous collection of more and up to date evidence that is used for monitoring purposes, so that projects and programs can be adjusted when more or other information becomes available.

These two questions of diagnosis and intervention will be at the heart of this book. We aim to assist the humanitarian sector with acquiring the analytical skills and tools in evidence production, collection, reduction, synthesis and analysis in order to answer these questions, as crucial part of the project management cycle and larger quality assurance processes. Put differently, this book focuses on the role of evidence and information during needs and risk assessments, program planning phases, monitoring activities and evaluation and organizational learning processes.

Obstacles to information collection, use and analysis

Whereas nobody in the humanitarian sector would deny the necessity of basing program decisions on information and analysis, the actual use of evidence in humanitarian programming remains limited (Darcy and Hoffman 2003, Darcy *et al.* 2007, Darcy 2009, Maxwell *et al.* 2013a). This is not so much caused by the fact that the sector lacks tools, methods and models to analyze humanitarian crisis for the purpose of programming. On the contrary, there are quite some analytical frameworks that can be used to diagnose humanitarian problems, such as the pressures and release model (Wisner *et al.* 1994/2005), the vulnerabilities and capacities model (Anderson and Woodrow 1989) and livelihood models (Chambers and Conway 1991, Morse *et al.* 2009). There are also sector-specific tools, such as the food security and nutrition response analysis tool (Maxwell *et al.* 2013a, 2013b; see also Darcy *et al.* 2013 for an overview).³ Finally, there are tools especially for organizational and operational security management (HPN/ODI 2010). All these models, if implemented correctly, can provide a sound basis for programming decisions. Nevertheless, in many cases these models are not used for the design of aid projects. The reasons for this are manifold, to name a few (Bradt 2009, Darcy *et al.* 2013, Maxwell *et al.* 2013a):

- As stated previously, the sector works in a highly dynamic context characterized by constant change next to security and access issues. This complicates ambitions to swiftly obtain sufficient and reliable information for humanitarian programming.
- The sector works under time pressure: there is the imperative to act speedily in order to limit suffering as much as possible, especially nowadays since social media reports on humanitarian needs and suffering are almost instantaneous. This induces high expectations of the sector, with public and private donors wanting to see action quicker, which may result in an ‘act then think’ attitude, in which little time is taken to collect and process information before acting.
- There are gaps between what donors wish to fund, what organizations prefer to do and what the needs on the ground are, resulting in risks of mismatch between needs and aid provided. In the humanitarian sector, there can be strong preferences for certain types of aid, because they are more visible (in-kind food aid versus preventive action) or because these match with other goals (such as food market surpluses in the West).
- The sector is characterized by high turnover and lacking capacities for information processing, contributing to lack of institutional memory.

In such a context, the use of in-depth and rigorous information collection and analysis methods and tools is difficult, especially given the fact that speed in humanitarian action is required. Nevertheless, there is a call and need for using evidence for programming, risk management and quality assurance in a rigorous manner. Is there a way in which the above obstacles can (partly) be overcome, so that both speed and rigor can guide the generation and application of evidence in humanitarian programming? We claim this is possible by providing the sector with an analytical framework that is as lean as possible, without compromising quality standards of information collection and analysis.

The Humanitarian Analysis and Intervention Design Framework (H-AID)

In this book, we present to the sector a concise model to answer the above-mentioned diagnostic and intervention question: the Humanitarian Analysis and Intervention Design Framework (H-AID framework). This framework has been generated on the basis of a thorough analysis of advantages and disadvantages of existing methods and tools for the humanitarian sector (see Chapter 2). This analysis facilitated the translation of the essentials of existing models in an understandable and hands-on way into the H-AID framework, so that humanitarian staff can quickly learn and apply this in their work. In other words, the H-AID framework can be regarded as a ‘meta-model’ for context analysis and informed humanitarian programming because it synthesizes and combines core elements of existing frameworks. By doing so, the H-AID

framework provides sufficient rigor for sound analysis, while at the same time taking the specific demands of humanitarian work into account. As stated by others (Maxwell *et al.* 2013a, 2013b, Darcy 2009), such a meta-model can function as a roadmap that guides practitioners to the necessary steps for thoughtful analysis and intervention in a comprehensive but concise way. The H-AID framework, however, goes beyond synthesizing other frameworks. It develops its own toolbox (Table 1.1).

In Chapter 2 we will argue how we arrived at the H-AID framework and its core components by comparing and evaluating existing analytical frameworks for humanitarian diagnostics and program design on various dimensions. Based on this analysis, we came to the H-AID framework that consists of the following core components, which are reflected in the structure of the book, namely: context, interventions and stakeholders. We develop specific tools that facilitate the analysis of crisis contexts, interventions and stakeholders (see Table 1.1).

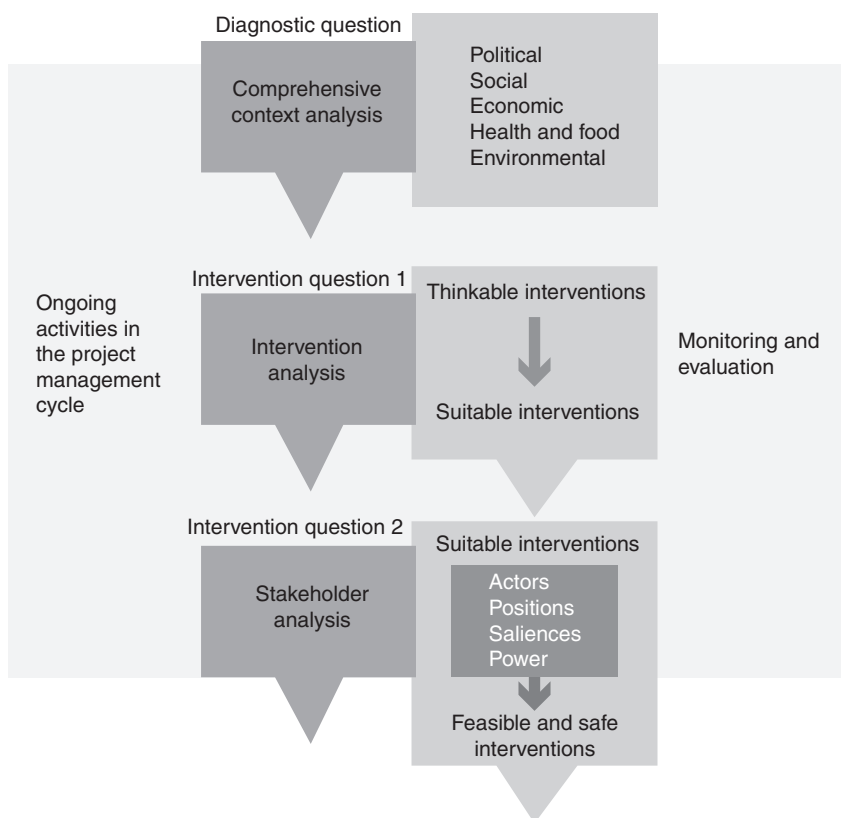


Figure 1.1 Overview of the humanitarian analysis and intervention design framework.

Table 1.1 The three core components of the H-AID framework

<i>Core components of the framework</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Chapters</i>
Comprehensive Context Analysis	Analysis of the social, political, economic, health, food and environmental context, preferably before and after a crisis, also related to risk assessment.	3–10
Intervention Analysis	Generating thinkable and suitable programming options and analyzing prior to the proposed project's start if, why and how the proposed activities will generate intended outcomes and effects, including safe access and safe aid provision, risk assessment and risk management (theory-based <i>ex ante</i> evaluation).	11
Stakeholder Analysis	Analyzing to what extent the generated suitable interventions can also be considered feasible and safe interventions given the stakeholder field one is operating in.	12
Monitoring and evaluation strategies	Defining and designing purposeful monitoring and evaluation tools; proper placing of these tools in the program/project design vis-à-vis organizational learning and accountability.	13

The basic thought behind these core components in our framework (context, interventions and stakeholder) is as follows (see also Figure 1.1). First, a thorough analysis of the context of a humanitarian crisis is required for a satisfactory answer to the diagnostic question: to what extent is there an actual or potential crisis and what is its nature? We propose to focus on those context dimensions prominent in existing frameworks for humanitarian needs assessments: the social, economic, political, health and food, and environmental context. In such an analysis one will also probably identify a wide range of actors that are of relevance in the particular emergency. Based on such a comprehensive context analysis, capacities and vulnerabilities in a particular humanitarian crisis can be identified with help of the *Comprehensive Context Analysis* (CCA) tool. This tool provides a quick overview of potential domains where intervention might be required.

Second, in the *Intervention Analysis* step we propose to use the generated context information for purposes of humanitarian programming by making a start to answer the intervention question by identifying potential domains for intervention. If a domain of intervention has been identified (such as food), we then propose to generate a set of thinkable options for action first (for example, within the domain of food security interventions there are multiple options such as free food distributions, cash transfers or seeds and tools programs, see also Maxwell *et al.* 2008, 2013a, 2013b). Based on this set of thinkable options, the method of *theory-based ex ante evaluation* is proposed to analyze which of these

options are indeed suitable to the problem and context at hand. This method thus allows analysis prior to a project's start if, how and why a proposed intervention will generate the desired results.

The final step is to connect the identified set of suitable interventions to the stakeholder field in the crisis in order to identify which suitable interventions are also feasible and safe, given the goals, resources and relations of the other actors in the context as well as of the organization planning to intervene. This will also help to determine what risk management procedures are required to be able to maintain access and implement desired programs. By this we mean to actively manage risks, not simply avoiding them. The *Stakeholder Analysis* is thus in our view a very particular kind of actor analysis, in which it will be investigated – from the point of view of one focal actor (i.e. a humanitarian organization) that has identified a set of suitable interventions – what allies are available to pursue these interventions next to strategies to achieve the intervention's aims. The overall analysis allows to think over the impact the intervention may have on actors and power structures and what potential threats and harm the intervention may have to the organization and the community.

The framework and associated tools presented in this book have been developed and discussed as part of the second semester specialization of the Master of Humanitarian Action (NOHA) at the University of Groningen in the past ten years, and as a module in the Humanitarian Management and Logistics executive master program of Lugano University.⁴ Ever since, these insights have been part of ongoing discussions with students, academics and practitioners.

The book aims to bridge theory and practice by providing humanitarian workers with academically founded, but practical tools, for sound context analysis and humanitarian programming. The book hence aims to enrich humanitarian programming practice by translating relevant insights from academia to the practical reality of humanitarian work. This bridging aim is reflected in the nature of the contributors to this book, which is a combination of academics in various disciplines and practitioners.

With this book, we hope to assist humanitarian aid workers to design impactful humanitarian interventions while at the same time to critically reflect on the way these interventions are planned and implemented. We do this by providing the sector with the essence of many analytical models for humanitarian diagnosis and intervention, and synthesize these into our model. We will also discuss the challenges of information collection, processing and analysis, and the use of evidence in humanitarian programming. Finally, we will discuss ways to connect insights gained from information collection and analysis to decisions about interventions.

This book is thereby targeted at all humanitarians interested in issues of information collection, analysis and use for purposes of context analysis, stakeholder analysis or intervention design. The book provides tools that can be used in, for example, internal trainings in humanitarian organizations and Master level courses in Humanitarian Assistance Programs, but also to those working in management, programming and evaluation positions in the sector.

Notes

- 1 See for example the Master programs offered by the Network of Humanitarian Action (NOHA) and Tufts University.
- 2 The increased academic attention to humanitarian action is illustrated by the founding of the International Humanitarian Studies Association in 2010 that has organized an annual meeting ever since.
- 3 Some of these models will more extensively be discussed in the next chapter.
- 4 This course was first titled 'Comprehensive Security in Humanitarian Action' and later 'Disaster Analysis and Intervention Design'.