

HPG Research Briefing

Measuring the impact of humanitarian aid

A review of current practice

Researched, written and published by the Humanitarian Policy Group at ODI

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The impact of humanitarian assistance is a key question for all of the stakeholders involved, including donors, aid agencies and the affected population. It would clearly be helpful, in deciding what sort of assistance to provide or how much is needed, to be able to answer questions about the difference aid made, or how many lives were saved. However, current practice in this area is generally poor; bold claims are often made about the impact of humanitarian assistance on the basis of limited evidence.

Aid agencies have long found impact difficult to measure. There are good reasons why, including difficult issues of causality and attribution, a lack of basic data, capacity restrictions and constraints of security and access. Nor is there any consensus around what 'impact' means. Nonetheless, pressure for improved analysis of the impact of humanitarian assistance has grown in line with the increase in resources allocated to the sector, and a broader focus on results-based management techniques in the public sectors of Western governments.

The new emphasis on results has its own risks. Within the humanitarian sector, there is concern that a focus on measurement could reduce operational effectiveness, and lead to the neglect of issues such as protection and dignity because they are difficult to measure. Focusing on

what is measurable risks reducing humanitarian aid to a technical question of delivery, rather than a principled endeavour in which the process as well as the outcome is important.

These difficulties and risks do not, however, mean that impact cannot be measured in some circumstances; where measurement in a scientific and quantifiable sense is not possible, impact can still be analysed and discussed. Tools and methods for improving the measurement and analysis of the impact of humanitarian aid do exist and the report highlights some promising areas of innovation. What remains to be seen is whether the humanitarian system will invest in the skills, capacity and resources needed to use and develop these existing tools and consistently improve its analysis of impact.

About HPG

The Humanitarian Policy Group at the Overseas Development Institute is dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice. It conducts independent research, provides specialist advice and promotes informed debate.



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This HPG Briefing Paper reports on research into how the humanitarian community measures and analyses the impact of humanitarian assistance. It is concerned with questions around how impact can be measured, why this is increasingly being demanded, and whether it is possible to do it better. It also explores the benefits, dangers and costs that paying greater attention to impact might entail.

This research has two main aims:

- to explore how impact in the humanitarian sector is currently measured, and why it is being demanded; and
- to explore how impact measurement might be done better.

The study is based on a review of published and grey literature within the humanitarian sector and more broadly, interviews with aid agency staff and two commissioned papers covering impact measurement in the food and nutrition and health sectors.

Definitions, objectives and context

The question of impact in the humanitarian field has typically been addressed in three main ways:

- Analysis of likely impact before the start of a project, in order to anticipate the wider consequences of an intervention.
- Ongoing analysis of impact throughout a project or as part of management systems, in an attempt to adapt interventions or monitor performance.
- Analysis of the impact of interventions after the fact, as part of evaluations or research.

Impact can be analysed at the level of individual projects, and at much broader organisational or country-wide levels. Attempts to measure impact can restrict their focus to the intended effects of interventions, or they can encompass broader indirect and unintended consequences. Agencies are sometimes required to assess the possible environmental impacts of their work as part of the proposal process. Assessment tools such as the ‘do no harm’ approach can also in part be seen as an attempt to anticipate the possible negative impacts of interventions. The assessment of impact has most often been considered as a sub-set of evaluation, and discussion of impact has tended to sit within evaluation departments.

There is no accepted definition of ‘impact’ within the humanitarian sector, and the definitions current within the development field may not fully capture the particular nature of humanitarian work. In particular, the concept of change is central in developmental definitions of impact, but in humanitarian aid the aim is often to avert negative change (for example to prevent famine), rather than bring about a positive change. This may be harder to measure.

Box 1: Impact assessment and changes in public management

The humanitarian system’s increasing interest in impact needs to be understood in the context of broader debates about accountability in humanitarian aid, and against the background of public management reforms within Western governments. A central element of this reform is the shift from an input–output management model towards a greater emphasis on results. Experience from the introduction of results-based or performance management systems within Western governments suggests a need for caution in adopting these approaches uncritically. The analysis of impact should not be seen purely as a narrow technical question about the effectiveness of individual projects; discussions of impact should not be confined to a sub-set of evaluation techniques.

Measuring and analysing impact

There are broadly three main approaches to impact assessment:

- *the scientific approach*, which generates quantitative measures of impact;
- *the deductive/inductive approach*, which is more anthropological and socio-economic in its methods and approach; and
- *participatory approaches*, which gather the views of programme beneficiaries. Participatory approaches are widely recognised as a key component in understanding impact, but have rarely been used in the humanitarian sector.

Although the terminology sometimes varies, there are generally two types of indicator: those that relate to the implementation of programmes (input, process and output indicators); and those concerned with the effects of programmes (outcome and impact indicators). Agencies have tended to focus largely on process rather than outcome or impact indicators. Although these indicators are easier to collect, they do not in themselves provide evidence that the intervention has had an impact. Citing the number of drug doses supplied, health structures supported or staff trained does not itself show an impact. Process/output indicators may in some circumstances be used as a *proxy* for impact where there is strong evidence of causality between the action being monitored and the related impact.

Analysing the impact of a humanitarian intervention is not straightforward, particularly in the dynamic and chaotic environments of complex emergencies. The difficulties of the operating environment, the need to act quickly in situations of immediate crisis, an organisational culture that values action over analysis and the fact that there is

little consensus around the core objectives of humanitarian aid – all these issues make analysing impact difficult. Techniques that are standard in the social science community, such as the use of control groups, are not widely used, and humanitarian practitioners tend to lack the skills needed to gather and interpret information. Finally, there are fundamental problems around the attribution of impact that cannot easily be resolved. This does not, however, imply that progress is impossible; impact can often be *analysed*, even if it cannot be *measured*.

It is possible to identify some promising developments in the analysis of impact, such as the use by IRC of mortality data to demonstrate health impact, or the development of CARE's coping strategies index as a way of assessing the impact of aid on livelihoods. The problem therefore seems to be less an absence of tools than a lack of capacity to utilise them fully. Humanitarian field workers often lack

the skills they need to carry out the sort of qualitative or quantitative assessments that would allow impact to be effectively analysed.

Conclusions

Despite tremendous improvements in the technical and programmatic aspects of humanitarian aid, assessment of the impact of humanitarian assistance is still poor in comparison to the level of analysis common in development aid. The methodological and practical difficulties can seem so great that it is tempting to conclude that it is unrealistic to expect meaningful analysis of impact in the humanitarian sphere. Yet the fact that the humanitarian system has not been particularly good at analysing impact does not imply that improvement is impossible. This study recognises the constraints to assessing the impact of humanitarian assistance, such as the volatile environments in which

Key findings of the research

A number of specific recommendations emerge from this research. These are organised thematically below.

Moving beyond the project level

- Concern for the impact of humanitarian aid should not be narrowly restricted to the project level. There is a need for greater investment in system-wide evaluations that can ask difficult and important questions about the responsibility for humanitarian outcomes, and the broader political dimensions within which the humanitarian system operates.
- Project-based approaches that focus on determining the impact of a particular intervention through a causal pathway from inputs to impact should be complemented by approaches that start with changes in people's lives, and that situate change in the broader external environment.
- Questions of impact should not be limited to the evaluation process. In the humanitarian sphere, a concern with change in the short term implies a need for impact to be considered in ongoing monitoring processes, and through techniques such as real-time evaluation.

Results-based management: potential and dangers

- It is too early to say whether the introduction of results-based management in humanitarian organisations will significantly improve the measurement and analysis of impact. Experience from elsewhere suggests that there will be a need for caution; in particular, measurement may remain largely focused on outputs and not impact.
- An increased focus on results brings with it a risk that harder-to-measure aspects of humanitarian action, such as protection and the principles and ethics that underpin the humanitarian endeavour, could be neglected.
- There may be room for humanitarian actors to explore further the potential for learning from experience in the private sector.

Measuring impact: skills, capacity and resources

- Impact in any context is difficult to measure and attribute; this difficulty is exacerbated in the dynamic and chaotic environments of complex emergencies. This does not mean, however, that it is impossible, and greater efforts could be made.
- The humanitarian system currently lacks the skills and capacity to successfully measure or analyse impact. Greater investment needs to be made in human resources and research and evaluation capacity if the desire to focus more on results is to be realised.

Approaches to impact: science, analysis and participation

- The humanitarian system has been consistently poor at ensuring the participation of affected populations. This is as true in impact analysis as in other aspects of the humanitarian response. Much could be learnt from innovations in participatory approaches in the development sphere, and possibly from customer-focused approaches in the private sphere.
- There is a place for both art and science in impact measurement: scientific, analytical and participatory approaches can often be complementary.

Indicators and objectives

- Analysis of impact could be improved through greater clarity about the objectives of humanitarian assistance, and by more consistent assessment of needs.
- Process indicators can sometimes be used as proxies for impact when there is strong evidence of a link between the action being monitored and an expected impact. There is a need for greater investment in strengthening the evidence base for how other activities, such as supplementary feeding or support to health clinics, relate to humanitarian outcomes such as reductions in mortality or malnutrition.

interventions generally take place, the high turnover of staff, the lack of access to crisis situations and the short lifespan of many projects. However, these should not serve as justification for not considering more seriously the question of impact.

Assessment of the impact of humanitarian action can take different forms, and have different functions. The choice of the appropriate approach for assessing impact may vary according to the context, the level of analysis and the degree of accuracy sought, as well as the overall purpose of the exercise. There are significant differences between routine monitoring and one-off assessments through surveys; between quantitative and qualitative/participatory approaches; or between statements about impact in project evaluations, or lengthy impact assessments through research and case studies. All these different forms and roles of impact assessment have their own advantages in specific contexts. The choice of method will depend on the objectives for which impact is being analysed, and the degree of validity that is expected.

It is important that the measurement of impact is not reduced to a narrow set of technical questions at the expense of the wider context in which aid is delivered. Equally, the principles of humanitarian aid must not be sidelined, and an analysis of the full effects of humanitarian aid must not be restricted through a focus on measurable results. For example, humanitarian agencies in some contexts may have a positive impact on reducing threats to lives through their presence, as much as through any measurable impact of activity. Impact assessment has tended to focus on projects and programmes. There is a role for the analysis of impact at all of the various levels of assistance: the project, the programme, the sector, the country and the organisation. Sector-wide or system-wide assessment of impact could be particularly valuable in shedding light on a number of important questions, such as the overall impact of the humanitarian enterprise, the coverage of humanitarian aid in a given context or the role of humanitarian aid in relation to other factors. The Rwanda evaluation remains the only system-wide evaluation of humanitarian aid.

Such evaluations may be particularly important in enabling the large questions to be asked, and responsibilities for meeting humanitarian outcomes to be properly assigned.

Taken as a whole, the humanitarian system is poor at measuring or analysing impact, and the introduction of results-based management systems in headquarters has yet to feed through into improved analysis of impact in the field. Yet the tools exist: the problem therefore seems to be that the system currently does not have the skills and the capacity to use them fully. This suggests that, if donors and agencies alike want to be able to demonstrate impact more robustly, there is a need for greater investment in the skills and capacities needed to do this. Given the large (and rising) expenditures on humanitarian assistance, it is arguable that there has been significant under-investment in evaluation and impact analysis. Many of the changes identified in this study would have wider benefits beyond simply the practice of impact assessment: greater emphasis on the participation of the affected population, the need for clearer objectives for humanitarian aid, more robust assessments of risk and need and more research into what works and what does not would be to the advantage of the system as a whole.

This HPG Research Briefing is drawn from Charles-Antoine Hofmann et al., *Measuring the Impact of Humanitarian Aid: A Review of Current Practice*, HPG Report 17 (London: ODI, 2004).

The full report, background papers and a resource guide are available from the ODI website at www.odi.org.uk/hpg/impact.html.

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