



## Evidence-Informed Humanitarian Action

### A Discussion led by the HIFA working group on Library and Information Services for Disasters, Emergencies, Disease Outbreaks

SHORT EDIT

1. What do we mean by evidence-informed humanitarian action (preparedness and response)?
2. What kind of evidence do humanitarians need, and why?
3. Call for examples and case studies: Where has evidence been lacking and what has been the result?
4. Call for examples and case studies: Where has evidence made a difference?
5. How can humanitarians access and use evidence more effectively?
6. How can humanitarians and information professionals work together more effectively?

Background: <http://www.hifa.org/news/join-hifa-global-discussion-evidence-informed-humanitarian-action-starts-16-october-2017>

There were 104 messages from 22 contributors in 11 countries (Bangladesh, Iceland, India, Nepal, Nigeria, Sudan, Switzerland, Uganda, UK, USA, Zimbabwe)

#### 1. What do we mean by evidence-informed humanitarian action (preparedness and response)?

Moderator: For me (a non-expert) this means humanitarian action that is informed by appropriate interpretation of the totality of all available, relevant evidence. It is analogous to (indeed a subset of) evidence-informed policy and practice. The same principles apply. The approach requires systematic review of available evidence, that in turn helps to inform international guidelines, which in turn help to inform national and local guidelines.

Alice Obrecht, UK: I think there is a widely accepted use of the following definition of evidence, which is broad (i.e. not specific to EBM) and allows us to consider qualitative information as evidence alongside quantitative:

Evidence is: information that helps to prove or to disprove a specific proposition.

This definition, as well as criteria used to assess the quality of evidence, is discussed in our original paper on humanitarian evidence: <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/insufficient-evidence-the-quality-and-use-of-evidence-in-humanitarian-action-alnap-0>

Jeroen Jensen, UK: There is not an agreed definition of 'evidence-informed humanitarian action' that I am aware of. Many of the issues you mention are possibly a good reason to refer to 'evidence-based humanitarian action' instead, and use the much more developed definition of EBM as a starting point.

Moderator: There is a case for the wisdom of experience to be increasingly complemented by an evidence-informed approach. Indeed, taking the third pillar of EBM (patient values) there may even be a case for evidence-informed humanitarian action also to consider adding

a third pillar: 1st Pillar: cumulative evidence (as in systematic reviews); 2nd Pillar: wisdom of experience; 3rd Pillar: societal values (?)

Chris Zielinski, UK: Evidence-based or evidence-informed? I suggest: neither. Evidence is a kind of information. What a person makes of the information is knowledge... So I would suggest using "knowledge-based practice"...

## 2. What kind of evidence do humanitarians need, and why?

Hasnain Sabih Nayak, Bangladesh: NGOs use following (not limited to) types of information in humanitarian action.

- Demographic Statistical Reports (usually published by govt or concerned UN or national agencies): For determining/justifying the project size
- 'Lessons learned' papers: For developing and planning future projects
- Public consultations...
- Annual Reports: For organizational/Projects/Programs promotion and reporting to donors
- Group Brainstorming: For idea generation
- Handbooks: Provide/Promote/Disseminate SOPs... to be followed.

Alice Obrecht, UK: I think we all need to take a much longer, and more critical, look at ourselves as knowledge providers. Are we spending enough time to understand demand? To build relationships with end users? To identify and target their learning needs? Neil has reflected on the fact that it has been hard to get humanitarian practitioners to provide their inputs on this forum discussion - similarly, ALNAP occasionally finds that a webinar or product is getting very low uptake at field level. This should prompt us to think about whether we are selecting the right topics and whether we are creating easy, accessible, meaningful opportunities for end users to engage with learning.

Moderator: Systematic reviews... are a very useful new approach to synthesising the findings of previous research on a given question, and complement rather than replace clinical judgement (or the 'wisdom of experience') and patient (or societal) preferences. The definition of EBM explicitly encompasses this triad of cumulative evidence, clinical judgement and patient preferences. Many other factors come into play in real-world decision-making (particularly in policy decision-making). Systematic reviews are not only a useful tool - they also challenge previous assumptions that 'the expert knows best'.

Alice Obrecht, UK: The problem, quite frankly, is that most systematic reviews of evidence are not relevant to answering questions in-context about programming design and intervention efficacy, a point made by the very people who have carried out systematic reviews in humanitarian action.

Alice Obrecht: ALNAP has been publishing Lessons Papers since 2001, and they have long since been one of our most downloaded products. The Lessons Papers aim to improve the performance of humanitarian action by sharing the learning from previous responses in a concise and readable format and a timely manner.

Alice Obrecht, UK: ALNAP will publish a Methods Paper in November 2017 which proposes a revised methodology for future ALNAP Lessons Papers.

### 3. Call for examples and case studies: Where has evidence been lacking and what has been the result?

The Lancet (7 October 2017), which says 'Today, the international framework for epidemic preparedness and response still does not include a role for research...'

CITATION: In search of global governance for research in epidemics.  
David H Peters et al.

The Lancet Volume 390, No. 10103, p16321633, 7 October 2017

DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.10166/S0140-6736\(17\)32546-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.10166/S0140-6736(17)32546-1)

[http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(17\)32546-1/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(17)32546-1/fulltext)

### 4. Call for examples and case studies: Where has evidence made a difference?

The following examples were given, but without additional information on impact.

1. ReliefWeb <https://reliefweb.int/disasters>

2. Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network Strategic Aims for 2016-2021 [http://www.comminit.com/global/content/role-collective-platforms-services-and-tools-support-communication-and-community-engagem?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=drumbeat744&utm\\_content=role-collective-platforms-services-and-tools-support-communication-and-community-engagem](http://www.comminit.com/global/content/role-collective-platforms-services-and-tools-support-communication-and-community-engagem?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=drumbeat744&utm_content=role-collective-platforms-services-and-tools-support-communication-and-community-engagem)

3. HC3. <http://healthcommcapacity.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/HC3-in-Action-Emergencies-final.pdf>

### 5. How can humanitarians access and use evidence more effectively?

Claire Allen, UK: I think open/free access is crucial for humanitarian agencies... Evidence Aid and ALNAP are committed to making evidence freely available at a single entry point.

Moderator: Emergency Open Access Initiative, run by the National Library of Medicine US: [https://www.nlm.nih.gov/news/NLMActivatesEmergencyAccessInitiativeforHarvey\\_Irma.html](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/news/NLMActivatesEmergencyAccessInitiativeforHarvey_Irma.html) a collaborative partnership between NLM and participating publishers to provide free access to full-text from more than 650 biomedical journals and more than 4,000 reference books and online databases to healthcare professionals and libraries affected by disasters.

"There is broad agreement in the humanitarian sector, both at the practitioner and leadership level, that communication and community engagement contributes to greater effectiveness and value for money. Despite many organisations and governments committing to this, action to make this happen as part of preparedness and response is not undertaken systematically."

[http://www.comminit.com/global/content/role-collective-platforms-services-and-tools-support-communication-and-community-engagem?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=drumbeat744&utm\\_content=role-collective-platforms-services-and-tools-support-communication-and-community-engagem](http://www.comminit.com/global/content/role-collective-platforms-services-and-tools-support-communication-and-community-engagem?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=drumbeat744&utm_content=role-collective-platforms-services-and-tools-support-communication-and-community-engagem)

From the IFRC website: The role of social media in times of crises has grown exponentially... Get the guide: <http://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/document/use-social-media-better-engage-people-affected-crises/>

## Organisations

Evidence Aid

ALNAP

## Resources

1. 'The Sphere Handbook, Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response, is one of the most widely known and internationally recognized sets of common principles and universal minimum standards in life-saving areas of humanitarian response.' The handbook (latest edition 2011) can be freely downloaded here:

<http://www.sphereproject.org/resources/download-publications/?search=1&keywords=&language=English&category=22>

2. WHO Guideline on Effective Community Engagement for Emergency and Outbreak Preparedness and Response

[http://www.who.int/publications/guidelines/guidelines\\_review\\_committee/en/](http://www.who.int/publications/guidelines/guidelines_review_committee/en/)

3. Disaster Lit, a National Library of Medicine guide to disaster and public health preparedness literature and related information freely available on the Internet.

<https://disasterlit.nlm.nih.gov/>

4. Disaster journals indexed in PubMed:

- Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness [restricted access]
- Disasters [restricted access]
- Emerging Infectious Diseases [open access]
- Health Security [restricted access]
- Journal of Emergency Management [restricted access]
- PLOS Currents (Includes section on PLOS Currents: Disasters) [open access]
- Prehospital and Disaster Medicine [restricted access]

It is notable that only 2/7 of the above journals are freely available.

5. Red Cross Guide to using Social Media in Emergencies

<http://sm4good.com/2017/10/11/red-cross-and-un-release-guide-on-how-to-use-social-media-in-emergencies/#.WfgghFu0PDc>

6. "The Complex Emergency Database (CE-DAT) is an international initiative monitoring and evaluating the health status of populations affected by complex emergencies.

(<http://www.cedat.be/>)

## 6. How can humanitarians and information professionals work together more effectively?

Humanitarian Evidence Week... is an initiative led by Evidence Aid and co-organised by the Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine to promote a more evidence-based approach together with over 20 organisations. <http://www.evidenceaid.org/events-and-training/hew/>

## Unanswered questions and comments

1. We do not have a definition of evidence-informed humanitarian action

2. We do not know much about primary research in humanitarian action - what is possible and what isn't?
3. Most importantly we have heard very little from the perspective of humanitarians. The discussion was publicised to the humanitarian community but there was no real engagement from humanitarian actors.
4. Has anyone attempted a typology of the different types of information that are required by humanitarian planners and workers, and which questions are best answered by which type of information?
5. If the humanitarian sector is not sufficiently evidence-based in its practice, to what extent is the problem one of lack of availability of (good) evidence, and to what extent is it lack of proper use of available evidence? What are the main challenges under each of these headings?

## Citations

1. 8 things we learned from our work on evidence this year: <https://www.alnap.org/blogs/8-things-we-learned-from-our-work-on-evidence-this-year>.
2. Humanitarian practitioners shouldn't aim to copy evidence-based medicine  
<http://www.evidenceaid.org/humanitarian-practitioners-shouldnt-aim-to-copy-evidence-based-medicine/>
3. Evidence on public health interventions in humanitarian crises  
Blanchet, Karl et al. The Lancet , Volume 390 , Issue 10109 , 2287 - 2296  
[http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(16\)30768-1/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(16)30768-1/fulltext)
4. Improving evidence for health in humanitarian crises  
Udani Samarasekera, Richard Horton  
The Lancet , June 2017; Volume 390 , Issue 10109 , 2223 - 2224  
[http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(17\)31353-3/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(17)31353-3/fulltext)
5. Recurrent failings of medical humanitarianism: intractable, ignored, or just exaggerated?  
Health in humanitarian crises. Sandro Colombo, Enrico Pavignani  
Volume 390, No. 10109, p23142324, 18 November 2017  
DOI: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(17\)31277-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(17)31277-1)

'Health action in crisis could become more effective if it were based on lessons learnt, new developments, and better ways of working together... Research shows that evidence per se has little relevance for decision makers, who need to take other factors into account... evidence informs aid policy and practice only when the political context, the networks, and the knowledge are all in alignment'.