

Evaluating the impact of humanitarian interventions: scope, method and findings: Brief workshop notes

I. The workshop

On the 21st of March 3ie, in collaboration with DFID and USAID, hosted a workshop ‘Evaluating the impact of humanitarian interventions: scope, methods and findings’ in London, UK. The aim of the workshop was to presenting and solicit feedback on scoping and methods papers that examine the evidence that has been produced in assessing the impact of humanitarian assistance and possibilities for generating new evidence given the constraints presented by complex humanitarian crises. This note presents the highlights of the workshop.

II. 3ie’s Humanitarian Interventions Thematic Window (HITW)

Humanitarian crises are complex situations where the demand for aid far exceeds its supply. So each dollar spent should be used effectively. Impact evaluations of humanitarian assistance can help ensure that this is so, and also respond to the increasing call to document results. Despite repeated calls from donors and think tanks advocating for their greater use, the use of impact evaluations in the humanitarian sector remains scarce.

3ie’s humanitarian interventions thematic window will tackle this shortfall by increasing the stock of quality impact evaluations in the humanitarian space and building greater capacity amongst humanitarians to conduct impact evaluations. Through this window, 3ie will fund and quality-assure several impact evaluations of humanitarian interventions across the world. With the expectation that these impact evaluations will not only prove to be of merit through the value of the evidence they generate on their targeted intervention but will also act as exemplars that can illustrate the applicability of this methodology to humanitarian interventions and the huge efficiency gains it can bring to the sector.

In the opening section, Dr. Howard White, Dr. Chris Whitty and Ms. Penny Hawkins presented the case for why impact evaluations are critical in the humanitarian assistance space.

III. Scoping paper

The scoping study was undertaken by Evidence Aid with the lead provided by 3ie. The paper was presented by Dr. Mike Clarke. Its aim was to understand the present state of impact evaluations in the humanitarian sector and identify the programmatic areas which impact evaluations funded through HITW should target.

During the course of their study Evidence Aid interviewed 50 experts in the humanitarian sector, surveyed about 400 respondents, reviewed the strategy documents of key humanitarian organizations and conducted a thorough search of several repositories to identify existing impact evaluations in the humanitarian sector.

The scoping study found a paucity of impact evaluations, a majority of which could not be classified as high quality. Further, they found these were clustered in only a handful of sectors; health (particularly mental), nutrition and peace building.

A needs map drawn from the interviews and survey saw humanitarians highlight accountability, food security, protection, water and sanitation and health as areas they'd like to see more impact evaluations in.

IV. Methods paper

The methods paper by 3ie in collaboration with SIPRI sought to demonstrate the applicability of impact evaluations in the humanitarian sector. This presentation was done by Dr. Jyotsna Puri and Dr. Tilman Bruck of 3ie and SIPRI respectively. The paper identifies the constraints that humanitarian crisis present to conducting impact evaluations and how they may be overcome. The authors use case studies to identify six unique crisis scenarios and show how methodologies may be adapted to overcome a wide variety of challenges these scenarios present. They illustrate how to; conduct ethical evaluations, use data sources creatively to overcome scarcities where they apply, conduct rapid impact evaluations, manipulate sample sizes to keep costs down, identify unintended consequences and establish the differential impact of interventions on different subgroups.

V. Impact evaluations in DRC

Ms. Barbara Shenstone's presentation brought to the forefront the experience of UN OCHA in the DRC & CAR. She sought to highlight that impact evaluations in the humanitarian sector are not only possible and illuminating but they can also act as an important fundraising tool.

The DRC and CAR are complex and long running humanitarian crisis scenarios and creeping donor fatigue is leading to a resource squeeze for humanitarian efforts in the region. Ms. Shenstone's team are looking to impact evaluations to cut through the complexity and identify the impact of their efforts and also identify how they can build greater efficiency into the work they are doing thereby allowing them achieve greater impact for the same amount of resources. There is also the hope that the results of the impact evaluation will show donors the good their money is achieving thereby reinvigorating them to commit further resources to the region.

VI. Other highlights from the meeting

1. There was a strong buy-in from participants at the meeting for impact evaluations of humanitarian interventions. To take this forward participants agreed a document, now titled 'Statement of Principles for Impact Evaluations in the Humanitarian Sector' should be prepared which calls on signatories to commit to the use of evidence in the design and implementation of humanitarian interventions and to undertake to seek opportunities for generating high quality evidence through impact evaluations where possible.
2. During the panel discussion it was suggested that off-the-shelf impact evaluations be prepared to minimize the time researchers need to design impact evaluations which investigate the humanitarian response to sudden on-set emergencies.

VII. Going forward

The following are next steps:

1. A draft 'Statement of Principles for Impact Evaluations in the Humanitarian Sector' will be circulated amongst participants as well as invitees who couldn't attend for comments.

2. 3ie will work closely with potential donors to create a funding mechanism through which high quality impact evaluations and systematic reviews may be supported.
3. Under the aegis of the 'humanitarian interventions thematic window' 3ie will look to develop a set of off-the-shelf impact evaluation designs or a set of protocols and guidelines to enable rapid impact evaluations of sudden onset emergencies.
4. The workshop was successful in highlighting the potential of impact evaluations to fill evidence gaps in the humanitarian sector. To maintain the impetus built amongst workshop participants, and carry it forward to the wider humanitarian community, 3ie and ALNAP will investigate building a platform to promote discussion on evidence generation in the humanitarian sector through impact evaluation.

For more information please write to

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