

Presentation outline & key points

Data, evidence and access to information: how are they used to make decisions about humanitarian response?

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The international community repeatedly asserts the value of evidence-based decision-making. But evidence is just one among many considerations in the decision-making processes that result in humanitarian funding allocation. We are unlikely to dramatically alter the uptake and use of evidence unless we understand the real, and often legitimate, constraints and influences (including domestic legislation, budgetary timelines and volumes, policy commitments, capacity, historic cultural and political relationships, specialisation and comparative advantage, and domestic political influences) that operate alongside evidence in the decision-making processes of a variety of donors at both the international and affected country level.

We would like to invite ALNAP participants to share their own experience of access to information, (big and open) data and evidence and discuss where changes and investments are likely to be effective in supporting better-informed decisions which can lead to better results.

Some key points

Funding in accordance with assessed needs is a key underpinning of the Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) principles, which includes the commitments to ensure that

- funding humanitarian action in new crises does not adversely affect the meeting of needs in ongoing crises (GHD Principle 11) and that it is
- in proportion to needs (GHD Principle 6).

As a minimum, to meet those principles you have to be able to assess needs in a comparable way and you have to know what resources are available - not just from your own budget, but from other sources too. Part one of this session will share examples of how donors and government officials in crisis-affected countries are reaching decisions and what information is available to them.

- Two of the most important drivers of decisions are:
 - i) 'what we did last year plus or minus 10%' and

- ii) , the bottom line – simply how much money a donor has to spend has the strongest influence on how widely their definition of needs is drawn and therefore on which activities get funded.
- The good news is that the quality and availability of information on risk, vulnerability and humanitarian needs is not only improving , more to the point, it is being used by some donors to systematically inform decision making. We will present information on how decisions are informed and made in Sweden, the Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF), the EC and the United States Office for Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) and how this affects outcomes.
- Strongly held beliefs demonstrably drive resource allocation. But these beliefs in turn influence the way that needs are articulated. The way that needs are articulated is, in turn, the evidence used for decision making on resources. In South Sudan, because of a commitment to the idea of a rapid transition to development, where residual acute humanitarian needs would melt away, there was no space for the huge and persistent burden of chronic needs. These chronic needs were thus repackaged as acute, providing the evidence needed for humanitarian intervention.

The 'evidence' for evidence based decision making will only be as good as information from the field. There is often a disconnect between the decision-making processes of affected communities, affected governments and international actors. Channels for communicating evidence, opinion and experience between these groups often do not exist and there is often disagreement with regards to what counts as legitimate evidence and who has the legitimacy to provide it.

Annette Were Munabi from DRT Uganda has been investigating the information that local officials have, how that is communicated to central government and humanitarian actors and the implications for humanitarian response.

- Until 2010, Uganda had no national policy for disaster preparedness and management. Information used before, during and after a crises is collected on a case by case basis depending on the magnitude, location and duration of humanitarian situation among other factors.
- In situations where entire communities have been displaced and settled in camps for long periods e.g. in Acholi sub-region of northern Uganda, humanitarian information is communicated by mobile phone and radio calls through the UN and camp heads. But when people return to their communities, access to information to inform decisions is much more of a challenge. Local governments are not equipped to collect, analyze and disseminate up to date situational data to the relevant stakeholders.
- The centralised decision making by the office of the Prime Minister (OPM) in-charge of coordination of humanitarian action has minimum participation of the affected communities:
 - when a massive landslide hit in eastern Uganda in 2010, it took over two weeks for the OPM to ascertain the magnitude of the damage, mobilize resources and respond;
 - although a contingency fund of 3% of the national budget is for unforeseen circumstances local governments lack information and guidelines to access it.
- At the height of disasters, the district disaster management committees that comprise of multi-sectoral stakeholders endeavor to get on site evidence and anecdotal information by media for assessment and contingency planning process. This quality of such evidence is questionable as it is distorted as the situations unfold e.g. during the Bududa landslides, three different sources recorded 50, 100 and 300 deaths.

Issues for discussion:

1. Given the poor quality of much information and the range of legitimate and other influences on decisions, are our expectations of 'evidence-based' decision making too high? Should we just aim for transparent, 'data-informed' decisions?
2. Can we make more use of technologies to gather, publish and aggregate information? Publish Once and Use Often is the mantra of the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI). IATI provides a platform so that anyone can publish information to a common definitions and in a common machine-readable format so that the information can be re-used and combined with other data. Is there potential for improving access to information on needs, evaluations, results, target populations?
3. How much priority should be given strengthening management information systems starting with community based systems for improved humanitarian and development outcomes?
4. Human intelligence, judgement and experience play a critical role in decision-making - is this sufficiently recognised in the context of the drive for evidence-based decisions?