

Beyond the Numbers: How qualitative approaches can improve monitoring of humanitarian action

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Much of the qualitative data that humanitarians are currently collecting is not being harnessed to inform decision-making. Why do humanitarian M&E practitioners still find qualitative approaches to monitoring challenging? Are there ways in which they can improve how they collect, manage and use qualitative data?

The ALNAP Secretariat has conducted background research with humanitarian organisations and qualitative experts outside the humanitarian sector to pull together a list of promising practice that can have the potential to be ‘good enough’ for many monitoring purposes.

Background

Recent ALNAP research found that many humanitarian agencies still struggle to apply qualitative approaches to monitoring. The challenge is twofold:

- Organisations see qualitative approaches as cheap and quick. They rely on just a few familiar methods which result in research design and sampling that is often of poor quality.
- Practitioners often express that they lack the confidence, skill and time to analyse and report qualitative results.

While this is not a new issue, humanitarian organisations are directing more investment to improving capacity for qualitative approaches to monitoring. These organisations recognise that qualitative information plays a critical role in developing a wider understanding of context, culture and the changes caused by humanitarian programming.

The ALNAP Secretariat aims to raise awareness of a set of ‘good enough’ qualitative approaches to monitoring that are useful in humanitarian settings, depending on the purpose of the data collection.



Definition:

Qualitative approaches to research seek to explore and describe social meanings and perceptions of phenomena (Flick, 2002). It is often textual but does not have to be (Saldana, 2011). Opinions on whether food is sufficient, for example, constitute qualitative data. Qualitative data includes information that does not relate numerically. In comparison, quantitative data includes counts or measures that have a numerical relationship to each other (so anything that is expressed in numbers, frequencies, rates or proportions). For example, the number of meals eaten daily is quantitative data. However, the numbers on a football team's t-shirts do not have a relationship to each other (the average of the numbers does not mean anything), therefore this is not quantitative data, even though they are expressed numerically. Importantly, quantitative methods can express qualitative data in a numerical manner.

Humanitarian agencies are, in fact, collecting more qualitative data than they realise. Yet much of both the explicit data and implicit knowledge is 'lost' when humanitarian organisations face high staff turnover. Little of the recorded information is effectively transferred between stakeholders (whether at the individual or organisational level).

As a result, data that can be highly valuable for more holistic and longitudinal analysis or evidence-generation falls through the cracks. 'Good enough' approaches to monitoring can help to harness and use much of this qualitative data that is currently being lost.

To fully delineate which qualitative approaches can be considered 'good enough', three myths about qualitative data in monitoring of humanitarian action need to be debunked:

1. Qualitative data does not count as evidence

Qualitative approaches have an explanatory power in comparison with quantitative methods, and can also be used to triangulate other information sources, to capture unanticipated changes and to encourage inclusive and participatory humanitarian action. In fact, the interpretation of all quantitative data is based on a qualitative form of judgement.

The qualitative methods typically used in humanitarian settings require purposive sampling that deliberately selects the most appropriate cases for the questions being monitored. This can often be a more relevant approach in humanitarian crises that face constraints to population data, access, security and time. If sampled correctly, this data can also be representative of a group of people, as it provides valuable information about different explanations within (and between) groups.

2. Qualitative data is only words

As subjective measures are often reported numerically, most humanitarian practitioners confuse them for quantitative information. In part this boils down to a confusion in the sector between qualitative data (i.e. the type of information being collected) and qualitative approaches (i.e. the way the data is treated or analysed). Too often, individuals fail to understand that while most of the outcome indicators used by humanitarians are qualitative in nature, they are treated quantitatively. For example, a percentage of people feeling safe is a qualitative nature presented as a quantity.

3. More quantitative data is collected than qualitative data

Humanitarian agencies are in fact collecting more qualitative data than they think they are. But many organisations are failing to utilise a lot of this qualitative data because it either does not match their view of what 'evidence' looks like or is not gathered in a consistent or structured manner and so it is 'lost'.

Typically, organisations collect responses to open-ended questions in post-distribution monitoring surveys and feedback gathered through accountability mechanisms and community engagement. Both are rarely categorised and analysed. Field staff observe programming and interact with affected populations daily

– albeit it in a completely unstructured manner – which over time yields tacit, ethnographic knowledge. But even in cases where descriptive notes are taken, they are seldom archived or shared systematically. While significant data collection may also be carried out by non-M&E staff for project implementation purposes (such as protection monitoring or livelihoods counselling), this is not always shared across programmes for broader analytical purposes.

Next steps

The ALNAP Secretariat wants to encourage a conversation about how we can maximise existing explicit and tacit qualitative approaches to monitoring. This is not an insurmountable challenge for humanitarian organisations. There are examples both within and outside the sector that show this can be done. We want to think in practical terms about different steps that can be taken to tailor solutions to the specific challenges faced by an organisation or country team. We want to encourage participants to share further examples of qualitative approaches that they have found useful, as well as lessons learned from their experience.

ALNAP's new paper *Beyond the Numbers* and other M&E research is available at alnap.org/me.

