

BRIEFING PAPER SEVEN

**GOOD HUMANITARIAN
ACTION USES THE
BEST KNOWLEDGE,
SKILLS AND TOOLS
TO ACHIEVE AN
EFFECTIVE AND
TIMELY RESPONSE**





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Suggested citation

Knox Clarke, P. and Obrecht, A. (2015) *Good humanitarian action uses the best knowledge, skills and tools to achieve an effective and timely response*. Global Forum Briefing Papers. London: ALNAP/ODI.

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ISBN 978-1-910454-30-5

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Francesca Bonino, Luz Saavedra and the WHS Secretariat for discussion and comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

The Global Forum Briefing Papers: What are they for and what do they tell us?

The aim of the Global Forum is to identify recommendations that will help the international system become more adaptable to different crisis contexts, thereby making overall humanitarian action more effective. To support these discussions, these Background Papers:

- Outline how the international system is performing against various criteria of effective humanitarian action
- Identify the key obstacles to improvement on each criterion of effective action
- Present the recommendations that have been put forward around the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) process to address these obstacles

Each paper's title describes a **success criterion** for humanitarian action. These are different ideas of what effective humanitarian action looks like. The seven success criteria were identified through a two-stage review of the evaluative research on humanitarian performance and the recommendations put forward for the World Humanitarian Summit process (for more detail, please see the accompanying paper: 'The Global Forum Briefing Papers: What are they for and what do they tell us?').

WHAT IS THIS SUCCESS CRITERION ABOUT? WHY DOES IT MATTER?

These sections give a brief description of the success criterion and the different views on why this is important for good humanitarian action.

HOW WELL DOES HUMANITARIAN ACTION PERFORM AGAINST THIS SUCCESS CRITERION?

This section provides an overview of what is going well and what is not with respect to each success criterion. It draws on evidence to identify the degree to which the criterion is being met in current humanitarian action. The primary source of evidence for this section in each paper is the 2015 State of the Humanitarian System

(SOHS) report, and it should be assumed that this is the key reference unless cited otherwise. This section also introduces the key obstacles to improvement, which are bolded in the text. These key obstacles are also derived from the 2015 SOHS, as well as from other research and evaluation on humanitarian action.

KEY OBSTACLES

This section is a summary list of the key obstacles described in each paper as inhibiting better performance against the criterion.

KEY OBSTACLES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section provides a list of the recommendations which seek to address the key obstacles and so to improve humanitarian action with respect to each success criterion. These recommendations have been synthesised from over 700 recommendations across 39 position papers, WHS consultation reports and the work of the WHS Thematic Teams (see 'The Global Forum Briefing Papers: What are they for and what do they tell us?' for more detail). They reflect the different recommendation areas external organisations have put forward and have been clustered according to the obstacles they seek to address. The aim of the synthesis is to accurately reflect the range of views and ideas for reform, and to connect these ideas to an evidence base on how the humanitarian system is performing. This means some synthesised recommendations may conflict with one another, or may not be mutually achievable, as there remains a lack of consensus among humanitarian actors on how best to improve humanitarian action.

ANNEXES

The annex to each paper (provided in a single-bound document to Global Forum participants) provides the full set of raw recommendations used in the synthesis, showing where these recommendations were clustered.

GOOD HUMANITARIAN ACTION USES THE BEST KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND TOOLS TO ACHIEVE AN EFFECTIVE AND TIMELY RESPONSE

1. WHAT IS THIS SUCCESS CRITERION ABOUT?

- Using the approaches, methods and tools which best achieve response objectives.
- Using data and evidence to achieve better outcomes.
- Meeting objectives as quickly as possible to address imminent danger to lives, health, security, dignity and livelihoods
- In thinking about response, this characteristic assumes all the people in need have been correctly identified (Paper 1) and the nature of their needs has been correctly understood (Paper 2)

2. WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Failure to identify and use the most effective approaches to a crisis (those that best meet needs in a timely manner) can lead to unnecessary and avoidable human suffering.

3. HOW WELL DOES HUMANITARIAN ACTION PERFORM AGAINST THIS SUCCESS CRITERION?

Reducing mortality and morbidity rates in crisis is arguably one of the most fundamental objectives of humanitarian action. Overall, excess mortality in natural disasters has decreased very significantly over the past 15 years, despite increases in the number of disasters and the number of people affected.ⁱ While most

of these decreases are the result of socioeconomic and developmental improvements, it is likely the provision of international aid has played some role.ⁱⁱ Excess mortality among conflict-affected populations also appears to be decreasing, although here the picture is more nuanced as the trend is very different across countries. In conflict and protracted crises, most of the deaths are from preventable diseases. However, acute malnutrition in conflict-affected populations appears to be increasing.ⁱⁱⁱ Mortality associated with non-conflict violence (and particularly urban violence), while generally stable globally, is high and increasing in a number of contexts.^{iv}

In terms of meeting stated objectives, in the period 2010-12, evaluations suggested that the majority of humanitarian interventions accomplished this (although there were some significant exceptions, in Haiti, Sudan and Pakistan). However in surveys, humanitarian practitioners reported that aid broadly met objectives^v 42% of the time, and did not^{vi} 56% of the time. From the perspective of affected people, 30% felt that aid was of acceptable quality, 18% felt it was not of acceptable quality and 32% felt it was partially acceptable.

There are a number of obstacles to humanitarians choosing the most effective approaches to responding to a crisis. Despite increased attention around improving the quality of evaluative information and data in humanitarian action, there remains **a significant shortfall in quality evidence^{vii} around ‘what works’.**

Data and information are not sufficiently harnessed and can pose security risks.

Decision makers are unaware that evidence exists, or do not use the evidences that exists.

This lack of evidence undermines the ability to ensure humanitarian decision-making will lead to effective programming, and also inhibits the ability to respond in the most appropriate way to a particular crisis in a particular context and to compare possible new solutions and practices. While there has been a rise in the use of ‘big data’ and information communication technologies for the improvement of humanitarian action, **these are not sufficiently harnessed owing to gaps in analytical capacity, inconsistent datasets and security risks.**^{viii}

Even where they exist, **data and evidence may not be incorporated into decision-making.** This can occur at many levels. At the level of funding and programme design, decision-makers may find it difficult to access or understand relevant evidence. Evidence that challenges the ‘accepted wisdom’ or previously agreed strategic directions is often ignored. Once a programme has begun, inflexible funding mechanisms may prevent it being adapted on the basis of evidence.

Since 2010, evaluations, interviews and surveys for the State of the System have suggested **ineffective leadership** is a significant constraint to effective performance. Where leaders are not sufficiently skilled and equipped with the right tools and approaches to make good-quality operational decisions, or where they are overwhelmed, operations will be less likely to meet objectives.

At an operational level, **staff may not be aware of or trained in the most effective techniques and approaches to use.** Rapid increases in the number of humanitarian workers do not seem to have led to similar increases in the number of training and learning opportunities available – particularly for nationally recruited staff – although a number of recent initiatives aim to address this. Where it is not possible to train existing staff, it may be necessary to hire new staff, or to be able to access specific skills from rosters or stand-by partners. Alongside gaps in training, **there are also difficulties in assuring quality in humanitarian response.** One approach to ensure humanitarians follow internationally accepted best practice is to codify this best practice and provide assurance for performance against this through standard-setting and monitoring.

Surprisingly, there is little formal evidence on the degree to which standards affect the quality of response, although there is a great deal of anecdotal evidence that the Sphere and companion standards, for example, have been widely used and appreciated. There is also a growing view that humanitarian activities are less effective when they **fail to establish effective feedback loops between affected populations, humanitarian agencies and donors**, thus missing the opportunity to incorporate the views of affected people to develop better programming.

At a broader level, while innovation is on the rise in the humanitarian sector, there remain several key challenges to harnessing innovative processes or research and development (R&D) for more effective humanitarian action. **Strengthening R&D processes continues to face a number of barriers**, including under-spending on R&D itself and on the organisational capacities needed to carry out innovation successfully; an absence of guidance or standards for organisations on how to identify, develop and take to scale innovative practices and solutions; and a lack of consensus around the key problems in humanitarian action that R&D should address.^{ix}

Also, **many actors in the system appear reluctant to take proven techniques and approaches to scale**. While innovation has risen in the humanitarian system, for a variety of reasons there remains a gap between the identification and successful piloting of a solution and the wider-scale adoption of that solution.^x Approaches previously known as innovations, such as cash-based programming or community-based therapeutic feeding, have made a significant impact on humanitarian programming and garnered sufficient evidence to move further away from the ‘innovation’ label and closer to the realm of ‘best practice’. However, they remain disproportionately funded and implemented compared with other approaches that are more familiar yet may possess a weaker evidence base for their effectiveness.

The ‘atomised’ nature of humanitarian operations, in which multiple organisations are working on the same response but under different directives, planning procedures and mandates, can also work against

Research and Development (R&D) processes face significant barriers.

There is a reluctance or delay in achieving wider adoption of specific techniques and approaches that have shown themselves to be effective.

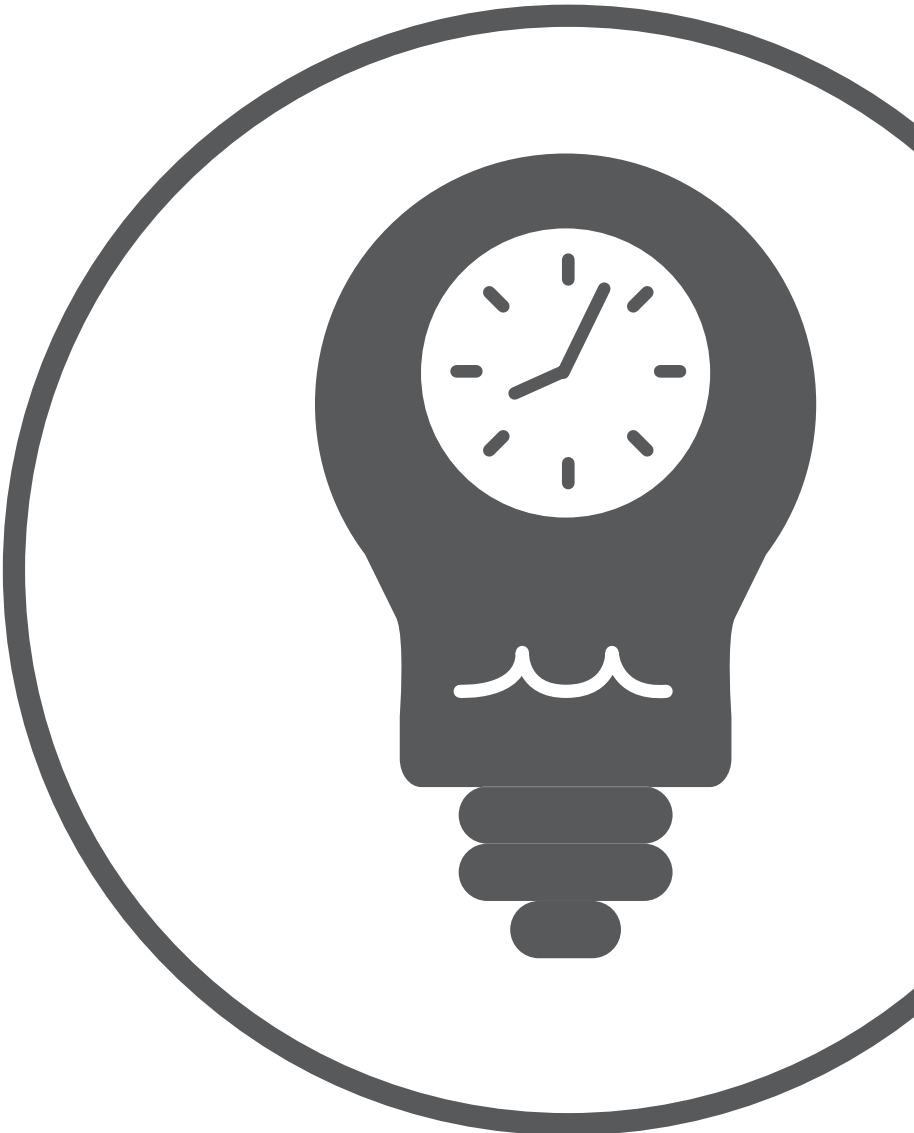
Humanitarian coordination and cooperation mechanisms do not include all concerned actors, are weaker at the local operational level and insufficiently flexible to adapt to context.

Responses are slow because of a lack of sufficient preparedness measures.

effective action. Each organisation tends to prioritise its own objectives: overall objectives for the whole operation may not be clear, and progress against these overall humanitarian objectives may not be monitored. The humanitarian system has put in place a variety of coordination mechanisms that aim to develop and achieve common objectives for whole responses. However, **these mechanisms are often not effective enough: they do not include all concerned actors; are weaker at the local (operational) level; and are insufficiently flexible to adapt to all contexts.** This can adversely affect the response as a whole.

Finally, timeliness is a crucial component of effective humanitarian action because it can mean fewer lives are lost and exposure to later-onset risks, such as disease, is mitigated. With respect to the speed of response and delivery, 49% of affected people were satisfied with how quickly assistance had arrived; 40% were not satisfied. A total of 39% of humanitarian practitioners felt the speed of responses was good or excellent; 60% felt it was only fair or poor.

Affected people and practitioners were more positive about the speed of the response in rapid-onset natural disasters than they were in other contexts. Survey results, evaluations and interviews from 2010 to the present suggest timely response has been most lacking in recurrent crises (e.g. Horn of Africa in 2010/11), conflict (e.g. civil conflict in the Central African Republic and Mali) and mega disasters (e.g. the Ebola epidemic). Humanitarian responses regularly take three months to go from a commitment to act to full operations. **Delays to humanitarian action arising out of insufficient engagement in early action/ preparedness activities** appear to stem from a variety of causes: these include limited disease surveillance (in the Ebola response); a failure to respond to early warning information (notably in the Horn of Africa), which can be attributed to reluctance to commit funds until lives are being lost; a lack of programming options to respond to the early phases of a crisis;^{xi} ineffective and time-consuming processes for releasing funding and deploying staff and materials; and ineffective decision-making processes.^{xii}



4. KEY OBSTACLES

1

There is a lack of strong evidence around 'what works'.

2

Data and information are not sufficiently harnessed and can pose security risks.

3

Decision makers are unaware that evidence exists, or do not use the evidence that exists.

4

Humanitarian responses do not use the most effective approaches because of poor leadership and decision-making.

5

Humanitarian staff lack adequate skills and training in best practices.

6

There is a lack of professionalisation/assurance in the humanitarian system for using best practices.

7

Humanitarian responses are not sufficiently informed by the context-specific knowledge and perspectives of affected people.

8

Research and Development processes face significant barriers.

9

There is a reluctance or delay in achieving a wider adoption of specific techniques and approaches that have shown themselves to be effective.

10

Humanitarian coordination and cooperation mechanisms do not include all concerned actors, are weaker at the local operational level and insufficiently flexible to adapt to context.

11

Responses are slow because of a lack of sufficient preparedness measures.

5. KEY OBSTACLES AND SYNTHESISED RECOMMENDATIONS

The WHS Thematic Teams' Bonn recommendations reflect the most recent thinking of the WHS Secretariat and Thematic Teams on the key areas for reform to be addressed by the Summit. These recommendations are italicised below.

1

KEY OBSTACLES

There is a lack of strong evidence around 'what works'.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Prioritise funding for interventions that will lead to the generation of evidence and processes, infrastructure, tools and talent to identify, support, validate and disseminate innovations.
- b. *Shift the focus from evaluating delivery performance to tracking and understanding the outcomes for affected people. A results framework should be developed based on outcomes in different contexts. An independent evaluation group could be established to monitor this.*
- c. Improve the quality of evaluations, including baselines around existing products and approaches.
- d. Collect longer term information sets.
- e. Investing in longer term data sets, and in monitoring the effects of humanitarian response on crisis situations.
- f. Collect evidence in real-time and use this to continually update and adapt projects to changing needs and situations.

2

KEY OBSTACLES

Data and information are not sufficiently harnessed and can pose security risks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. *Ensure more systematic and responsible use of big data for better understanding the needs of affected populations.*
- b. Improve the analysis of data for decision-making.
- c. Anonymise and de-militarise security data in order to share it more widely.
- d. Conduct a security information audit to explore what is being done with security data.
- e. Review international law regarding the collection of security data to address affected people's rights to privacy and ethical questions about the safety of affected populations in security data collection and storage.
- f. Create standards and accountability mechanisms for each stage of security data collection and use.

3

KEY OBSTACLES

Decision makers are unaware that evidence exists, or do not use the evidence that exists.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. *Establish knowledge centres/centres of excellence in the Global South (possibly linked to Humanitarian Leadership Academy).*
- b. Donors should require evidence in support of programme design before releasing funds.
- c. Make funding more flexible, to respond to changes as a crisis situation develops.

4

KEY OBSTACLES

Humanitarian responses do not use the most effective approaches because of poor leadership and decision-making.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Focus on organisational structure and operating procedures, as these underpin effective leadership. Pay particular attention to information management systems.
- b. Focus on leadership teams (not individuals) as decision making fora. Ensure that locally recruited staff participate in these teams.
- c. *Regionalise preparedness and response through devolving decision-making to the regional level. Empowered regional IASC-type structures could be one way of doing this.*

5

KEY OBSTACLES

Humanitarian staff lack adequate skills and training in best practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Establish training/learning opportunities at national and regional levels.
- b. Identify skilled people from outside the humanitarian sector, including but not limited to the private sector and academia, who can provide specialist partner capacity (e.g. in urban response).
- c. Create and support sector-wide standards for use by all actors, including governments.
- d. Adopt Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS) as sector-wide standards: align organisational reporting, funding and programme design tools to the CHS.
- e. Create technical standards where these do not exist (e.g. cash).

6

KEY OBSTACLES

There is a lack of professionalisation/assurance in the humanitarian system for using best practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Consider external certification for the application of the CHS.

7

KEY OBSTACLES

Humanitarian responses are not sufficiently informed by the context-specific knowledge and perspectives of affected people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Prioritise accountability as a key humanitarian issue, possibly as a humanitarian principle.
- b. *Humanitarian action needs to be driven by the concept of subsidiarity.*
- c. *Establish donor commitments on accountability to affected populations, which build on Good Humanitarian Donorship. Monitor these through a mechanism similar to the Humanitarian Response Index.*
- d. Reform funding mechanisms to allow for changes to programming based on the views of and input from affected people.
- e. *Nominate a senior humanitarian official within every major emergency operation that is responsible for ensuring affected people are included in shaping the response.*
- f. *Establish a contact group from the affected community for every major response to inform decision making.*
- g. Invest in innovation to improve the engagement of affected people, particularly when access is constrained.
- h. Ensure participation of affected people in the identification of underlying risks and in programme design.
- i. Include clear systems of communication and feedback in all programmes.
- j. Evidence reporting on community consultations and their consequences for action in agency reports and share it with communities.
- k. Partner with local civil society in all cycles of programming, including design, delivery and monitoring.
- l. Adopt sector-wide standards/Core Humanitarian Standards (CHSs) to improve quality and accountability.
- m. Invest in greater leadership in accountability and community engagement, including among donors, at cluster and humanitarian country team (HCT) level, within humanitarian agencies and within specific field teams.

8

KEY OBSTACLES

Research and Development processes face significant barriers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. *Agree on shared ethics, principles and standards to guide innovation that places affected populations and their communities at the centre of developing solutions.*
- b. *By September 2016, convene a high-level innovation advisory group, including the private sector, academia and scientific community, that will help champion significant advances in 2-3 major challenges by 2020.*
- c. *Increase investment in humanitarian research and development (R&D), and innovation to the equivalent of 1.5% of humanitarian assistance by 2020, drawing in both public and private investment and innovative financing mechanisms.*
- d. *Create strategies to systematically use innovations to address programming gaps.*
- e. *Gain funding from a variety of sources.*
- f. *Create partnerships with other sectors.*
- g. *Ensure inclusion of affected people in innovation processes.*

9

KEY OBSTACLES

There is a reluctance or delay in achieving a wider adoption of specific techniques and approaches that have shown themselves to be effective.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. *Scale-up multi-sector, multi-purpose cash (e.g. increasing from 3.5% to x% by 2020).*
- b. *Develop minimum standards (SPHERE) for cash programming in humanitarian contexts.*
- c. *Support wider adoption of area-based programming in urban contexts.*
- d. *Support wider adoption of a 'non-camp' based approach for internally displaced people (IDPs).*

10

KEY OBSTACLES

Humanitarian coordination and cooperation mechanisms do not include all concerned actors, are weaker at the local operational level and insufficiently flexible to adapt to context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Include the local authorities, civil society, private sector and affected populations in coordination mechanisms.
- b. Create government-led coordination mechanisms aligned to government structures.
- c. Clarify the relative roles of various actors (government, international agencies) to enhance cooperation.
- d. Develop standards for cooperation.
- e. Share more security information.
- f. Set up platforms for private sector partnership.
- g. Agree common procedures to allow for better cooperation and interoperability.
- h. Make coordination mechanisms more flexible and country specific.

11

KEY OBSTACLES

Responses are slow because of a lack of sufficient preparedness measures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Create targets to increase humanitarian or development finance for preparedness.
- b. Conduct assessments in collaboration with development and peace-building actors.
- c. *Multi-risk analyses should be done systematically at the local, national, regional and global levels, kept updated, rooted in scientific (physical, natural and social sciences) and local knowledge and shared in a transparent and open manner.*
- d. States and national institutions should increase the revenue they allocate to preparedness and response.



6. ENDNOTES

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