

This short paper summarises the key points and identifies some of the most important questions from the full meeting background paper on evidence and knowledge in humanitarian action. It provides a useful 'frame' for the discussions that will take place at the meeting. The full paper can be found at on the meeting webpage ([www.alnap.org/events/28th.aspx](http://www.alnap.org/events/28th.aspx)).

### A fundamental question about evidence in humanitarian action:

To what extent is the 'evidence problem' in humanitarian aid due to lack of **understanding** about what good evidence might look like; poor **availability** of (good) evidence; or inability to properly **use** available evidence?

### What do we mean by 'evidence'?

**"Evidence is objectively true and demonstrable knowledge, which stands in opposition to opinions and received good practice"**

**"...but critics argue that this view marginalises the experience of affected populations, and makes humanitarianism a technical, rather than value-led, activity."**



For the 'Evidence & knowledge' meeting background paper, 'evidence' is defined as: information which can meaningfully be used to support or to counter a statement or proposition

### However you define it...

Often  
humanitarians  
need evidence that  
demonstrates...

...whether the situation is such that external assistance is required, or will be required

... whether a certain type of intervention will lead – or has already led – to improved outcomes

... whether a certain type of intervention is the best choice among the various options available

... and all of these questions require different types, quality and amounts of evidence, which depend on the specific circumstances.

If you want to read more about the theories and concepts of evidence in humanitarian action, see [Section 2](#) of the full background paper.



# How do we judge the quality of our evidence?

Collecting evidence creates some challenging problems:

## Truth/accuracy

Does the information correspond to the real state of affairs?

## Representativeness

Is the information representative of a wider group?

## Generalisability

Can conclusions can be generalised beyond the context in question?

## Significance

Does the information relate to the proposition in question?

## Attribution

Can we use the information to make a robust causal link between two conditions or events?



Go to [Section 3](#) of the full background paper to find out more.

What are the relative roles of programme functions (such as needs assessment and evaluation) and research in generating evidence for policy?

Do humanitarians have the necessary skills to generate high quality evidence?

How can decision-makers balance different types of evidence?

Do our assumptions about evidence affect the degree to which affected people can influence humanitarian operations?

# How is the sector dealing with these challenges?

How does the evidence currently produced score when judged against the criteria listed above?

## EARLY WARNING

Real advances have been made. Information is more accurate and representative but weighing and analysing multiple sources of information remains difficult. Effective response is hindered by prioritisation of outcome indicators (e.g. malnutrition) over leading indicators.

## EVALUATION

Evidence is generally qualitative and based on triangulated interviews and observation. Evaluations often fail to include the knowledge of affected populations, prioritising evidence from 'outsiders'. Tensions exist between the objectivity of evaluations and more subjective 'learning' approaches. Difficulties of showing attribution.

## NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Great variation in approaches. Access and time considerations often prevent thorough data collection, leading to overreliance on expert knowledge. Close association between needs assessment and funding can lead to bias that threatens the accuracy of assessments. Needs assessment depends on definitions of 'need' which are often external: 'whose evidence counts?'

# What is the proper role of evidence in decision-making?

Evidence is intended to improve humanitarian action. But this will only work where decision-makers can access the evidence; understand it; and choose to use it to inform their decisions. The paper identifies a variety of institutional and psychological barriers to using evidence. As a result...

## Early warning evidence ignored

Recent events in the Horn of Africa show that early warning evidence is still not being used.



## A weak relationship often exists between needs assessment and decision-making

For decisions on response, there is a high degree of 'path dependence' - where past decisions limit the range of decisions that can be made in the present, regardless of whether the context has changed. An example of this might be decisions based on factors such as resource availability and strategy, which are outside the needs assessment.

## Evidence is used despite being 'out-of-date'

Continual monitoring helps to avoid decisions being based on old, and therefore potentially irrelevant, data. Effectively updating our knowledge and testing propositions about the severity of a situation, and the appropriateness of the response, is important for decision-makers.

However, evaluations suggest that in many cases, monitoring is insufficient.

## Evaluations are used to improve programming, but in a highly selective manner

Evaluations are more likely to lead to changes in programme implementation or funding where:

- there is already interest in the performance of a programme
- the production of the evaluation coincides with a 'window of decision making'
- results are communicated in an appropriate and accessible format to decision-makers
- mechanisms for 'follow-up' exist
- decision-makers have been engaged in the evaluation process.

Recent developments in evaluation are building on these findings to increase the degree to which evaluations are used.



Go to [Section 4](#) of the full background paper to see a complete discussion on using evidence for decision-making.

**We look forward to hearing your reflections and thoughts on all these issues at the Evidence & Knowledge meeting. You can also ask questions, share your experience or start a discussion about evidence ahead of the meeting in the [ALNAP forums](#).**

[www.alnap.org/events/28th.aspx](http://www.alnap.org/events/28th.aspx)