ALNAP Learning event

ALNAP Strengthening humanitarian action through evaluation and learning

DISASTERS EMERGENCY COMMITTEE

WORKSHOP SUMMARY
Syria Crisis: Evaluators' learning exchange

DISCLAIMER: This document reflects the content of a presentation delivered by Lewis Sida and not necessarily the DEC's or ALNAP's views. The summary captures some of the key points discussed by the workshop participants and facilitated by Lewis Sida. The summary is not meant to provide an indication of agencies' commitments on evaluation work planned or underway in Syria.

1. INTRODUCTION

The DEC together with ALNAP organised a learning event for evaluators and evaluation managers currently working on, commissioning, or planning evaluative work covering the conflict and crisis in Syria. The event took place on 13 September at the DEC offices in London.

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- Meet peers and share some of the challenges being faced around planning, managing, evaluating and learning from the Syria response.
- Seek advice and share emerging learning on how to plan, manage, and carry out evaluations of humanitarian response in conflict settings.

This short report summarises the discussion and sets out some simple next steps agreed by the group.

2. BACKGROUND TO SYRIA AND EVALUATION CHALLENGES

The Syria conflict enters its third year as a brutal and complex civil war. With its origins in popular uprising and the backdrop of the 'Arab Spring', the nature of Syria's civil war as something different has only really become evident over the course of 2013. What had previously been assumed to be something similar to 'regime change'; mostly political with only peripheral humanitarian implications has instead become the most challenging conflict in decades, with profound humanitarian needs.

The most obvious humanitarian concern has been the ever increasing number of refugees in neighbouring countries. This has now passed the 2 million mark, making it a larger refugee crisis than even the aftermath of the Rwanda genocide. Inside Syria the caseload is less certain, with estimates currently ranging from 4 – 6 million people displaced and in need. What is certain is that whole towns have been reduced to rubble in the fighting and daily bombardments, fighting and siege are making life intolerable for civilians.

For the humanitarian operation, this has meant several enormous challenges. These include:

1. A response spread over 4 -5 countries, with each country operation as big as a stand-alone humanitarian emergency.
2. A divided context inside Syria, with access severely constrained on both sides. In government controlled territory a restrictive and securitised state controls all movement using registration and legal blockages to restrict access; in rebel-held areas ongoing fighting combined with chaotic armed groups and the risk of kidnap makes working extremely high risk.
3. A divided international and regional political community, most notably at the Security Council leading to paralysis. For humanitarians this has meant an unfamiliar UN context; largely absent in rebel areas, mute in government areas and UNHCR coordinating the response regionally. In turn this has meant an absence of UN leadership on access and many aspects of coordination.
4. A predominantly urbanised, middle income context making traditional delivery modalities challenging to apply, and operations both more expensive and vulnerability more complex to gauge.
5. A non-traditional area for humanitarian operations meaning baseline data and ongoing background analysis is highly limited. This in turn means programming decisions are being made with limited information.

What is true for operations is also true for evaluation. Much of the work in rebel areas is being done by remote management. Invariably this means there is little good monitoring data. What data there is does not circulate because of security and access concerns. Data is contested --first casualty of war is truth-- and manipulated. This is also true in neighbouring countries, notably Lebanon where confessional politics means there has not be a census since 1932!

Currently, there are some efforts underway to gather better data. In the north, the opposition-controlled Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) has made some tentative efforts to gather needs data and has established a nascent disease early warning system. The UN is planning, for the first time in over a year, a needs assessment in government-controlled areas, and is undertaking interviews with recent refugees to try to establish a general picture of need. In Jordan and Lebanon agencies are expanding traditional data-gathering tools as they become established, for instance the recent vulnerability assessment for Syrians in Lebanon (VASYR).

The access and data constraints make the monitoring and evaluation context extremely challenging. This is compounded by the multi-country nature of the crisis, making any comprehensive overview expensive, time consuming, complex to organise and potentially burdensome on over-stretched operational teams. The fluid and changing nature of the crisis also means that findings can quickly become out of date, adding a further level of complexity.

Nevertheless, it is also the case that such analytical work is urgently needed. In an environment as complex as the Syrian crisis, agencies continually run the risk of programming in ways that are ineffective, strain delicate communal tensions, or even lead to resource capture by warring parties. Aid diversion is another significant risk; donors simultaneously urge agencies to take risks to reach people and profess a zero tolerance for aid diversion. And yet inside Syria there is limited guarantee this is not happening. International agencies have limited access to independently monitor distributions and security often makes this infeasible. In opposition areas armed groups routinely raid aid convoys (the Turkish Red Crescent has recorded significant aid capture in some areas they are serving).

The new ALNAP guide on humanitarian evaluation contains some very useful tools on remote evaluation . This can serve as a starting point for agencies grappling with the practicalities of how to go about designing M&E in such a complex situation. Given the scale and potential longevity of the crisis, there is great potential for agencies to work together to do joint M&E work, as well as research and analysis. Agencies also need to consider investing in systems now that have the potential to yield results at a later stage. Such systems might range from simply gathering and storing the data that is available (from market prices to health indicators), to setting up new monitoring systems and networks – where possible collectively on an agreed range of indicators, to establishing new research entities (such as the various food security units in East Africa).

3. WHAT PEOPLE ARE ALREADY WORKING ON

The DEC has just completed its response review. An external consultant led the process that included both the secretariat and membership representation. The process has been well-received, engaging agencies in some useful reflection on operations. There were some challenges in undertaking the review, however, not least security and access issues, as well as the cost and time entailed in visiting all affected countries. Countries not visited were interviewed by Skype.

Several agencies have conducted internal reviews, including HelpAge, Oxfam, Save the Children and Tearfund. Both IRC and CARE are planning internal reviews and Merlin is about to start an evaluation of their trauma surgery work. The Merlin evaluation is part of their DEC commitment; CAFOD and Oxfam are also due to conduct evaluations under the DEC commitments.

Agencies also have a range of ongoing initiatives or resources that are being compiled or due to be introduced. Oxfam is using its Humanitarian Information Tool (HIT) and CARE has undertaken two baseline studies in Jordan. These resources will be shared amongst the group as they become available.

4. WHAT WE THINK THE MAIN ISSUES ARE

The meeting considered a range of challenges and issues that need to be addressed in the monitoring, evaluation and evidence spheres. The Syrian context is particularly challenging given the combination of these challenges, including the huge scale and complexity of the crisis and its impacts on the region.

Some of the immediate issues that agencies are dealing with include:

1. **Access and risk transfer:** Access is one of the biggest issues for the aid operation overall. Lack of permissions in government controlled areas of Syria, kidnapping and banditry in opposition areas, and the security threats of intense fighting in contested areas make working in Syria extremely high-risk. This risk is also present in border regions, especially in Lebanon and Iraq. This has consequences for monitoring and evaluation, especially in terms of risk transfer. One obvious solution is third party monitoring and using national consultants in Syria for data

gathering. However, there is a moral duty for agencies in ensuring this risk transfer is done in an informed and consensual fashion; that people are aware of the risks they are taking and do not feel under undue pressure to do so. Equally, agencies need to assess and manage the risk. This may include accepting responsibility for the transference of risk.

2. **Scale:** The sheer scale of the Syria crisis creates problems for evaluators. With the aid operation inside Syria split in two, and huge refugee programmes in neighbouring countries, there are in effect at least five separate operations that need to be evaluated (Syria government-controlled, Syria opposition-controlled, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and for some Turkey). This means significant cost for those agencies working in all or many of these contexts, and the challenge of forming coherent evaluation narratives across contexts and operations that significantly differ.

3. **Evidence and triangulation:** Access issues in Syria and its neighbours mean difficulties in collecting data, as has already been touched on in the first point above. Additionally, data is highly politicised with each party actively seeking to manipulate information to reinforce its position (either playing up, or playing down the crisis). Where data does exist, most are reluctant to share it – either for these political reasons or for security reasons. Finally, as Syria and its neighbours are middle income countries, they have not traditionally gathered "humanitarian" type data, or at least not in the formats that are familiar to the evaluation cadre. This means there is a significant challenge to generate data against which programming can be measured. It also raises questions about the standards of data the collective response (donors, agencies, affected governments) are willing to accept. When is good, good enough? How can we triangulate? How big are the data gaps and what are the data limitations?

4. **Model of M&E and learning processes:** The access, scale and limitations of available data suggest agencies will be challenged in designing monitoring and evaluation systems. Another issue is the 'shelf-life' of the data, as the crisis continues to be incredibly fast-moving and fluid. Keeping even context analysis relevant is a challenge, never mind strategic recommendations on how to prioritise resources. There is a need to capture learning as the crisis progresses – feeding this back into programme work, but also to understand the necessary innovations agencies use to do their work and to understand how it is making a difference.

5. **Timing, hierarchy and utilisation of evaluation:** As a result of the fluidity and rapidly changing context timing of evaluation presents another significant challenge. Evaluation necessarily entails an extra burden for stretched and challenged implementation teams – getting the timing and the level right is important. Fundamentally this is about understanding utilisation – learning aspects of evaluation will only be useful if they address teams' needs. Decisions on balancing national, regional, project/programme level needs are important, whilst not overwhelming the field team with different processes.

6. **Accountability systems:** A recent accountability exercise by Oxfam has shown that surveyed refugee populations had little idea of what was on offer by aid agencies. Introducing recipients' feedback and engagement processes is highly complex in this fluid, new, evolving, dangerous and politicised environment; as well as time consuming and resource intensive. Accountability to donors presents another significant challenge. Aid diversion is already an issue of policy discourse ; donors are simultaneously preaching a risk-taking doctrine to reach those

in need whilst espousing a zero tolerance policy for aid diversion. For evaluators, the usual tensions between accountability and learning objectives, linked to audience and purpose will need to be thought through. For instance, Save the Children is currently holding learning events at a regional level as these appear most appropriate to their context.

7. **The challenge of collaborative approaches:** The sheer scale and complexity of the Syria crisis suggests that collaborative approaches would offer some major advantages. Costs can be shared, as can analysis, approaches and even resources. Unfortunately, the security situation means that agencies are necessarily cautious about sharing information – there is a real risk of putting staff in danger through information being shared too widely. There is a need to find creative ways to share information, and to collaborate on evaluative exercises, despite the constraints. Data storage, jointly developed tools, sensible targeting of communities (so as not to overload them), will all be part of this.

8. **Finding the right teams is always a challenge of evaluation and monitoring.** The usual issues of language and contextual expertise are layered with confessional divides and access and security issues. Third party monitoring is a sensible option, but risk transfer issues need to be addressed (as above).

There were a number of other issues that emerged in the initial roundtable discussion. These included:
- Quality assurance through partners: how to guarantee minimum standards of delivery?
- Implementing structures through alliances: how to work within families to ensure uptake of monitoring and evaluation findings?
- Defining humanitarian action: in a middle-income context knowing the level at which assistance should be provided (with higher expectations of urban populations).
- Facilitating and planning time for reflection: another perennial problem in humanitarian action that paradoxically is needed more in complex situations such as Syria that also demands more time and therefore creates less space.

5. DISCUSSION ON EMERGING PRIORITY AREAS RELATING TO M&E WORK

Whilst the group agreed that all of the challenges identified needed working on, for the purposes of time and clarity, three were chosen for further discussion with a view to identifying some potential solutions.

Challenge 1: Access and risk transfer issues

The issues around access and risk transfer are similar for operations and for monitoring and evaluation. Consequently, the mitigation measures are similar and hopefully operational practice can be integrated into M&E planning. Nevertheless, the group identified some initial measures, including:

1. Thorough context analysis, in particular understanding the different political and military factions and what this means for access.
2. Proper risk assessment, disaggregating for different actors and geographical locations. Measures in place (such as insurance) as a result of risk assessments.

3. Proper risk management protocols for kidnapping and other security issues built into evaluation design. Ensuring deployed evaluation teams have the requisite skills including safety, security and basic first aid.
4. Proper HR procedures in place for local staff, consultants, local contractors and consultancy firms to ensure risk measures are adequate and appropriate.
5. Engagement with relevant authorities (through operations where possible) to negotiate access for evaluation and monitoring teams, including with non-state actors and non-state armed actors where necessary.

Challenge 2: Collaboration and information sharing

The barriers to collaboration and information-sharing were recognised as stemming from legitimate operational and security concerns. It was seen as an important role for groups such as the ALNAP/DEC evaluation managers to create safe spaces for information-sharing where this was possible and build trust so that it was possible where appropriate. This included:

1. Need to be open with donors and the public as much as is feasible.
2. Use of existing tools such as the joint Syria Evaluation Portal to share information. Try to ensure this is not censored for any other reason than security.
3. Potentially putting in place confidentiality protocols for information sharing, allowing agencies to share information that is sensitive, building trust through this process.
4. Building networks of monitoring and evaluation professionals in the region as a way of building trust. Practically this means trying to be consistent about who is sent to information-sharing and M&E meetings.
5. Facilitation by other agencies such as the DEC and ALNAP to create safe spaces for discussion and joint learning.
6. Building evidence for sharing, especially on issues such as innovation.

Challenge 3: Data quality

Gathering data in any emergency context is always challenging. Section 3 of this short report has highlighted some of the issues specific to the Syria context. The group recognised it was important to start investing in systems and people now, as the crisis could potentially extended into many months and even years. This might include:

1. Investing in national and local staff capacity through targeted training and exposure to monitoring and evaluation activities.
2. Liaising with and investing in UN-led assessment process and other initiatives such as the Assessment Capabilities Project (ACAPS) or the Joint Rapid Assessment of Northern Syria (JRANS), to build general capacity. This is also useful as over time it will generate a pool of trained enumerators who can become a shared resource.
3. Having the ability to be opportunistic when there are new initiatives, or access permits to support data and evidence-gathering initiatives.
4. Having the capacity to catalogue data, and assess its reliability based on where it is collected (from other countries) and by whom (tertiary data, partners has a partner that does the

assessment for you, or informants being identified from someone who knows someone or doctors who come in and out of regions).

5. Having systems to update data on a regular basis, especially basics such as refugee and IDP numbers.
6. Designing tools to cope with data uncertainty, and being aware of the tools available (HPN reviews, Oxfam working on guidelines for the collection of digital data). These will be shared on the Syria Evaluation Portal.

6. NEXT STEP

The group agreed to start sharing reports on the joint Syria Evaluation Portal.