

Evidence Aid: Identifying and Meeting the Need for Systematic Reviews in Disasters

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Background: Humanitarian interventions are complex and uncoordinated in many areas affected by disasters. Furthermore, because of an increasing number of interventions by different aid agencies, it is difficult to measure the outcomes of specific actions and interventions, and the process for choosing adequate interventions remains a major challenge. The decision about which problems to focus on during emergencies all too often depends on how comfortable aid agencies and their partners feel, rather than the magnitude of the problems to be solved or the strength of the relevant evidence. However, because disasters differ by their nature, actions to solve their consequences also need to differ and need to be appropriate to the relevant settings, drawing on evidence from similar locations, types of population and problems in the past. The choice of actions and interventions should be based on what has been proven to work, and what has the potential to work, in the relevant setting.

My research will help to make choices easier, in part by investigating how decisions are made in such complex situations. How do humanitarian planners and aid workers know that a particular intervention is going to work in a specific area? How do they know that the intervention has not failed in similar settings, if they don't consider what has been done elsewhere and what has and hasn't worked? Most importantly, how do they decide if the chosen action is likely to do more good than harm?

In light of the complexity of delivering aid to affected populations, aid workers should use a more rational way of thinking to bring about solutions. A reliable estimate of the likely effects of interventions and actions should come first when planning and implementing responses to disasters and the effects should be considered when evaluating humanitarian action.

Proposed solution: People making decisions in complex situations would benefit from ready and timely access to existing knowledge to inform their choices about the options available to them. Systematic reviews already play a major role in healthcare decision making and are increasingly used in other sectors such as education, nutrition, logistics, etc. Systematic reviews summarize existing knowledge in a transparent way and help avoid undue emphasis on any single study. However, they remain underused and sometimes unknown among aid workers. My research is seeking to change this and to improve access to reviews, which is important for those who don't have time to search multiple websites or published sources.

Strategies: Evidence Aid is an international initiative, providing free access to systematic reviews, training aid workers on how systematic reviews are

produced and building a database of reviews on the effects of humanitarian interventions. It is seeking to help the range of people who set policy, make decisions and deliver aid on the ground, so that they can access the available evidence and make more informed decisions.

Need for reviews: One of the first steps in my research is a survey of humanitarian aid workers, agencies and donors, which is revealing their need and desire for systematic reviews to improve their interventions and to assess the impact of their efforts. This survey is being conducted in English, French, Spanish and Arabic; and the preliminary findings (85 respondents) show that 83% think that systematic reviews are useful in disasters, and almost all agreed or strongly agreed (25% and 71%, respectively) that humanitarian interventions should be based on reliable knowledge of which interventions work, which don't work and which are potentially harmful. The most commonly reported barrier to the use of systematic reviews was inadequate access (70%). Participants want full reviews plus comments from relevant experts (61%) and would like reviews to be online (83%). Of the 25 respondents who worked for donor agencies, 83% said that systematic reviews could be used to assess the likely effects of interventions before providing funding.

Partnerships and other activities: In order to reach a large audience and to endorse the Evidence Aid project, I helped organize the first Evidence Aid conference in Oxford in September 2011, drawing on the early findings from my qualitative research. The conference was attended by more than 70 people from international and global aid agencies. This success was built upon in collaboration with the Trinity International Development Initiative (TIDI), Irish Aid, Concern, and the Humanitarian Action programme at UCD in organizing a subsequent event in Ireland to promote evidence-based practices in humanitarian settings. The second Evidence Aid conference will be in October 2012 in Brussels, hosted by Evidence Aid and the Belgian Red Cross - Flanders.

Other important developments that my PhD research is contributing to are the building of formal partnerships. For example, a letter of understanding between Evidence Aid and the U.S. Center of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) will be signed shortly; and in February 2012 I represented Evidence Aid at an expert meeting on selecting and measuring indicators for evaluating aid agencies' actions during emergencies. This allowed me to meet new partners for Evidence Aid, to share our expertise with leading experts in the humanitarian field and to build connections to further my research into how evidence is, and should be, used in disasters.

Conclusion: Our generation is privileged to have the resources, technology and expertise to solve global challenges. These challenges are ever present, and the impact of earthquakes, tsunamis, flooding, extreme weather, etc will continue to increase. Not using systematic reviews to inform policies and practices in such circumstances is, at best, a missed opportunity and a waste of resources. It is irresponsible to intervene in other peoples' lives when attempting to help those affected by disasters without asking if one is doing more good than harm.

Emergency relief workers, in collaboration with other disciplines, need to make the best use of available knowledge and resources to avoid making decisions intuitively, with little certainty of what will and won't work. Based in the Centre for Global Health at Trinity College Dublin, my research and Evidence Aid more generally is taking the lead in bringing stakeholders together to discuss and advocate for the role of systematic reviews to improve health and well bring after disasters. My research will help to detail not just what is known, but what we need evidence on, and how best to use it in complex emergency situations.

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