



Assessing Humanitarianism: Disasters & Data Dissemination

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The 'effectiveness' of humanitarian assistance is a topic of great debate and limited consensus. Whilst donor governments, NGOs and the public regularly seek answers regarding the impact of the human and financial resources they have provided, those who provide and study aid find it difficult to offer clear, succinct answers regarding the impact of the vast amounts of time and money mobilized for disaster relief. With the aim of further investigating these problems of assessment, this HCRI seminar brought together expert practitioners from the field of disaster response and scholars from the disciplines of medicine, history, politics and anthropology in an attempt to merge the knowledge of those engaged in the practice of data collection and dissemination with those undertaking critical intellectual work on processes and impacts of knowledge production. From this, key issues and debates emerged which not only shed light on the wider problem of assessing humanitarian aid but also helped set an agenda for future areas of interdisciplinary research.

The mechanics of data collection

In terms of being able to assess the need for and impact of humanitarian assistance in areas affected by disasters and violence, the basic collection of relevant data emerges as one of the most pressing issues. As was raised in numerous talks and discussions, the collection of 'facts' which would allow for objective assessment are complicated by a range of characteristics of these environments. Poor transport links, limited or damaged communication networks, mobile and/or dislocated populations and political barriers put in place by the host government all limit the degree to which 'assessors' can gather requisite data. There are of course differences in collecting data in areas of political conflict as opposed to disasters zones, however, both processes can be highly political with states, government and NGOs being hesitant in terms of allowing critical research to take place. Assessing humanitarianism is also made difficult by the nature of the international aid community, which itself is made up of a highly mobile population; often the individuals a researcher would need to talk to in order to fully understand the nature and impact of programming will have left the area being studied, returning to their previous job or having moved on to another humanitarian mission. For this reason, much useful data is 'lost' with the institutional memory of many organizations being limited by the transient nature of their workforce and the short term nature of their work. Finally, knowing what questions to ask has also been highlighted as a central problem of assessment, and as will be addressed below, is often biased by the interests and positionality of those undertaking the research.

Dissemination and knowledge transfer

Once data has been collected the problem becomes one of dissemination—ensuring that the knowledge acquired makes it into the hands of actors who can use it to improve the practices of aid delivery. This process is made difficult for many of the reasons discussed above. A further issue which has been raised is the problem of self-censorship, whereby institutions

may not 'release' the data and assessments they have gathered for fear of jeopardizing access to the crisis zone or the financial resources to continue their work. Further, the releasing or promotion of data and assessments may not always be advisable. For example, a focus on 'facts and figures' which contradict local beliefs and values are problematic in times of turmoil and crisis. In cases where the population is having to manage high levels of disruption and disorder, actors need to understand and account for the powerful impact of myths and fear. At times, public perception of risk (such as the faulty but oft perceived health risks of dead bodies) might lead to actions being taken to meet public expectations that do not necessarily reflect the 'objective' knowledge possessed by actors (in this case the relatively low risk to populations of dead bodies). Actors should be aware that times of upheaval may not be the most appropriate time to attempt to 'educate' or transfer knowledge.

Returning to the more general issue of technologies of data dissemination, it was noted that the current crisis in Haiti has provided evidence of progress in this regard, with the use of mobile technology and social networking sites being used to transmit information and data in order to improve and more effectively target the provision of aid. It is also possible that there are lessons to be learned from the private sector, who at times have shown both the motivation for and flexibility required to assess and respond to disasters. Further, several examples of successful knowledge transfer provide evidence that progress is occurring in terms of assessing and improving upon technologies of aid. Just as the war in Vietnam altered the provision of health care in the 20th century, current conflicts and disasters are shaping medical care elsewhere—a tacit sign of positive assessment. The advances in emergency medicine being used by US and NATO forces in Iraq and Afghanistan have made their way into the Accident & Emergency wards in North America and Europe. Along this line, there are many opportunities for South to North knowledge transfers—work completed in China reveals that while 'northern' modes of knowledge have helped facilitate micro-level responses, states such as the UK may have much to learn in terms of national or macro level responses from Chinese institutions. Whilst effective dissemination of data and assessment does not always guarantee policy advances, the many successful examples of knowledge transfer suggest a particular utility in further comparative research in order to advance the process and understanding of the dissemination and utility of assessments.

Forms of data and the production of knowledge: motivation and epistemologies

Underlying the more practical debates concerning data collection and dissemination are considerations regarding the types of methods and thus forms of data that are used in assessments and the variable nature of the knowledge that is therefore produced. Likewise, the very notion of assessment must also be called into question. For what purpose does one engage in the assessment of humanitarian activities? Historical analysis points to some familiar motivations for assessing effectiveness. Looking at past accounts of NGOs and donors we see an intimate relationship between the notion of assessment and calls for

'accountability', both in political terms and perhaps more importantly, financial—there exists a long history of NGOs wanting to assess the impact of their financial contributions.

Historical analysis also reveals the use of both qualitative and quantitative modes of assessment, providing insight into the logic and utility of both approaches. Comprehensive qualitative reporting is evidenced in the early reporting on the humanitarian facets of the Crimean War, War of Italian Unification and Franco-Prussian Wars. The accounts offered by the Quakers in the latter part of the 19th century offered more detailed and personal accounts of the impact of war and the potential of humanitarian assistance to alleviate human suffering. Alternatively, from early on in the 'humanitarian movement' there is evidence of a 'statistical imagination' or even 'statistical intoxication', with the work of J.C. Chenu providing evidence of the roots of modern day assessors desire for (or fascination with) numbers. Both historical and modern accounts thus bring us back to a fundamental epistemological question within the social and human sciences, namely, what can we learn from different forms of knowledge and does one form provide superior answers?

In relation to the forms of data created via assessments and the methods used, one must always be cognisant of the bias within the knowledge being produced. Whether quantitative or qualitative, knowledge regarding the processes and effectiveness of humanitarian assistance is potentially imbalanced towards either epistemic, political or financial interests. In epistemic terms, there may be a preference for particular regimes of knowledge, with imperfect techniques, cultural relativism or emotive colouring pushing knowledge and facts in a particular direction. For example, those with a positivist bias may privilege the 'hard facts' of positivist methodologies, creating modes of assessment based on the belief that the truth may be captured in figures such as 'battle deaths per year' or 'morbidity rates'. Alternatively, those with a biased towards post-positivist methods may prefer the forms of qualitative methodologies that risk adopting victimhood or essentialist narratives.

Of course political-economic biases are equally problematic, with modes of assessment being specifically created or used in a way that suits particular actors in terms of their political and economic goals. Evidence of such bias may be found by tracing the financial flows of aid donations, funding for research as well as a more blatant 'cherry picking' of facts and figures that support a particular course of action. For example, the crisis in Darfur is often cited as case where the number of deaths and displaced have been used to justify various courses of intervention (or lack thereof) by local, national, regional and international actors. Some suggest that decisions to use inflated fatality statistic are possibly being used in order to justify aggressive forms of intervention against the ruling regime in order to protect economic interests in the region, such as oil. Concerns have also be raised over the potential 'militarization of research and assessment'—with the USA's 'Human Terrain' project epitomizing this concern.

The promise and problem of reflexivity in analysing assessment

Given the problems of collection, dissemination and bias presented above, one must ask 'what role' for assessment in our efforts to improve our understanding and practices of aid? Despite the debates and critiques made throughout this seminar, the desire to use the forms of knowledge we *do* possess with integrity and with the aim of improving humanitarian assistance undercut several of the day's presentations and discussions. Knowledge and reflection of the above issues was of course deemed essential in this regard. Further consideration of the notion and practices of assessment potentially allow for a more accurate and/or ethical use of data. Several key questions and avenue for further research were highlighted with this aim in mind. Actors should ask *why* an assessment is being made—is it with the aim of setting an objective target (i.e. decreasing child mortality rates) or are there other political-economic interests at stake? In line with this, we should ask who collected the data and how the assessment funded and implemented. Of course, the asking of such basic questions may not always suffice. The notion that simple reflexivity can 'save' our social and political practices from the dilemmas identified above is problematic. Ultimately, what is needed is a further analysis and challenges to the modernist discourse of progress— a deconstruction of the simplification and reification of improvement. Analysis and challenges to these dominant discourses which shape our modes of assessment and thus our courses of action require continued dialogue between practitioners and scholars from multiple fields. Such dialogue will occur at the upcoming HCRI seminar where the themes of assessment, data collection and the use of data are considered in greater depth and in relation to the case of Darfur.