



Darfur: Assessing the Assessments

**Humanitarian & Conflict Response Institute
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This two-day event explored themes and research questions raised in the Institute's previous seminars in relation to the case of Darfur. Through dialogue with scholars from across Europe and the Sudan and aid workers with experience in the region, the seminar addressed a range of issues related to the assessment of humanitarian need and programming. Analysis of this region, whose place in the humanitarian discourse has been determined by a range of ecological, economic, social and political factors, simultaneously clarified the role and use of assessments in the fields of humanitarian and conflict response while also further problematizing processes of assessment. Whilst the speakers and discussants provided much insight into why there has been a supposed need for humanitarian action in the region, and the response that has ensued from various actors, the seminar also resulted in a framework for questioning the role of assessment in both the causes of and responses to humanitarian need. This seminar culminated in a focused research strategy meeting at which the HCRI and seminar participants engaged in a productive discussion on the direction of a future collaborative research agenda.

Why engage in assessment?

As part of this event, a public screening was held of the film *Darfur Diaries: Message From Home*—a documentary which attempted to expose the commission of war crimes and the impact of these crimes on the population of Darfur. While an emotive and provocative film, the screening and ensuing discussion highlighted both the practical limitations and questionable ethics of engaging in assessments which provide little more than a 'catalogue of suffering'. Nonetheless, the moral need for assessment was asserted, as it was suggested that it is in part through assessment that aid workers can find guidance for acting responsibly and with accountability. This moral need can be coupled with what was viewed as a practical need for assessment, as to varying degrees of success, such tools provide aid workers with means for identifying those most in need, or the places where limited resources may be used most effectively. Whilst serving these practical or financial needs, assessments can also be used to shift political and moral attention to particular issues—in these cases actors engage in assessments as a means of redirecting or steering debates and as a way of advocating a particular course of action.

More controversially, however, was a discussion of the use of assessment in answering questions related to the *causes* of humanitarian incidents. According to one school of thought,

the problems to which humanitarian actors respond can only be fully resolved if the so called 'root causes' of the conflict are sought and identified via tools of assessment. Alternatively, there are those who argue that the use of assessments to determine causality and thus address so called 'root causes' is not only a futile task given the complexity and multi-faceted nature of many humanitarian dilemmas, but also not in the mandate of humanitarian actors, whose focus should remain on dealing with the impacts and not causes of crises and catastrophes.

How are assessments created?

The seminar exposed participants to the wide range of range of informal and formal methods that are used to assess humanitarian dilemmas. Studies of Darfur and the wider region reveal that methods from simple, (almost passive) observation to structured and in-depth (active) interviewing shape the assessments which influence policy and practice. However, regardless of the method employed, nearly all speakers discussed the problem of access to data. As raised in previous HCRI/ESRC seminars, access to data and to the individuals who could provide such data is often blocked due to security reasons (where it is simply not safe to allow assessors to enter the research site) or for political reasons (in cases where political figures do not want details to be found or disseminated). In the case of Darfur, both reasons for a lack of access have been noted, with security problems presenting problems for both academic and practitioner research, and the government of Sudan actively blocking the collection of data through the expulsion of NGOs and strict limitations on the movement of internationals in and out of the area.

Also in terms of the creation of assessments, it was noted that with multiple (often competing or contradictory data) the formulation of an assessment largely hinges on who the assessor trusts. This raises several questions surrounding whose voice is granted the most power and to whose voice one assigns the most value. Related to these questions is a concern of one speaker, who argued that increasingly, the 'data sources' of many assessments are now other assessments. This has resulted in what the same speaker referred to as a 'symphony of assessments'—a body of appraisals that when looked at substantively are not easily or clearly traced back to the reality they are trying to describe, but rather rely on other interpretations of reality found in other assessments. The use of various statistics and conclusions relating to Darfur provide a clear example of such a 'symphony' with the data provided in earlier assessments being integrated, re-used (or as some would argue, 'misused') by a range of other actors including other NGOs,

western celebrity fronted advocacy campaigns, donors and politicians. Such a use of data presents problems for humanitarian practitioners and scholars—the difficulty in determining the original source of data on which reports are based greatly complicates the ability of academics and practitioners alike to analyse and/or judge the need for, suitability and indeed impact of humanitarian action.

How are assessments used?

Finally, the panellists discussed the multitude of ways in which assessments are used. Whilst in many cases it appears that assessments are used to assist in making difficult decisions regarding where, when and how to intervene based on an assessment of 'need', other more problematic uses of assessment were discussed. Several participants spoke of the use of evaluations to support a particular and/or narrow political or policy objective. In the case of Darfur multiple actors at a range of levels (international, regional, national and local) can be seen as using of assessments in such a way. Assessments that support a more 'liberal' narrative of human rights may be used in support of calls for military intervention or be at the root of what some refer to as humanitarian colonialism or humanitarian imperialism. Other assessments are chosen by state actors, who have a different set of aims—perhaps remaining in power at the national level or asserting their sovereignty internationally. In both cases, assessments are being used to create a particular image, a representation of a particular reality that suits actors' wider aims.

Of course the use of assessments in this 'political' way is not seen as universally problematic. The overt use of assessments in such a way are accepted and even welcome in some circles where such politicization of assessment is seen as furthering the wider aims of justice, challenging power structure or giving voice to those most in need. In Darfur for example, some might not see an inflation of numbers of displaced or deceased as wholly negative, with the desire for an 'objective truth on numbers' being seen as a less important aim than raising awareness on abuses and suffering in Darfur. Whilst many remain concerned that the misuse or manipulation of assessment could be used to support arguments for intervention and increased control by external actors, others welcome the advocacy role that assessments can play. In this same vein, it has been argued that the ability to produce objective and neutral assessment is a false hope, that all assessments allow for (and in fact may demand for) a degree of discrimination and that assessments invariably (and must) lead to support and

assistance being given to some groups and not others. While problematic for some, this use of assessment is seen by others as a tool for righting particular wrongs and alleviating the suffering of particular groups.

Finally, a related, but alternative question was raised, namely, how or why are assessments *not* used? As highlighted throughout the seminar, assessments that do exist may not be disseminated, may be blocked or in cases of informal, casual assessment, may never make it to the written form. There are varied reasons for this. As discussed previously, some actors have limited incentives to provide honest assessments, which may have negative consequences for either themselves or the institution to which they belong. Governments, for example, are unlikely to want to share or highlight assessments of their actions which reveal their failures as a governments, or abuses committed against their own citizens. But it is not just governments who act in such a way—participants noted that aid organization also need to constantly justify their own existence and may be unlikely to produce or disseminate evaluations that question the rational for their existence as an actor or institution. Organizations do not want to write their way out of a job or funding opportunities by producing an assessment that says they are not needed. Of course these are two of the more negative narratives that have been produced regarding the motivation for not using particular assessments. Other speakers suggested that assessments may not be used simply do to bureaucratic barriers, institutional inertia, a lack of political will or a lack of funding to disseminate or implement findings.

Assessing the assessments of humanitarian need and practice in Darfur and beyond

The analysis and evidence presented throughout this seminar leaves us with a wide set of questions and issues deserving of future research. As such, the seminar ended with an extensive discussion of the need and opportunities for research collaboration between the HCRI and its affiliates. Through such collaborations on issues related to the impact of elite practices, processes of inclusion and exclusion in the humanitarian realm, the role of ‘numbers’ in assessment and policy, and the representation of crisis and conflict more generally the Institute and their academic and practitioner affiliates will increase both our understanding of, and potentially our effectiveness in the delivery of assistance to Darfur specifically, but also to other areas affected by conflict and crises.

