According to need? Needs assessment and decision-making in the humanitarian sector
A public meeting at the ODI to launch HPG Report 15

On 25 September 2003, the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) held a meeting at ODI to launch the Group's report on needs assessment and decision-making in the humanitarian sector, which is the result of a year-long study begun in June 2002 and funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), ECHO and AusAID. It forms one part of a wider package research commissioned by the Montreux group of donors looking at the current system of international humanitarian financing.

The aim of the study was to explore the ways in which responses by the international humanitarian system taken as a whole can be judged to be *proportionate* and *appropriate* to the needs of those affected by disaster and conflict. It did so through a critical examination of current practice in needs assessment and decision-making, looking at key elements of the system (UN and non-governmental agencies and governmental donors) and at how agencies and donors mutually interpret and respond to crisis. An overarching concern with the application of principles of impartiality and universality informs this critique.

This report represents an edited summary of the discussion which followed the presentation. The speaker was James Darcy, HPG Research Fellow and co-author, with Charles-Antoine Hofmann, of the report. The meeting was chaired by Joanna Macrae, HPG Coordinator.

A slide presentation and accompanying speaker notes is available at: http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/meetings/needs.ppt.

Questions and comments from the floor

Questions and comments are unattributed

First speaker: Why have you introduced the concept of risk in place of vulnerability? Risk is a probabilistic term: you are 'at risk of' but you are 'vulnerable to'.

James Darcy: We take risk to mean the product of threats and vulnerability, so in the report, we analyse both threats and vulnerability to those threats. We have some difficulties with the way that vulnerabilities are defined, but we take vulnerability as a critical concept nonetheless and as an essential part of the analysis.

New speaker: There are some interesting issues around institutional responsibility for assessment. Can assessment be separated from resource mobilisation?

New speaker: Although we would like to work to common standards, use common tools and technology and coordinate assessment, the whole humanitarian community, from the multilaterals to the donors to the NGOs, works with a very parochial approach in terms of both assessment and implementation. How do you relate the practicality of that observation to the recommendations in the report?

James Darcy: I agree that assessment and responses tend to be parochial, if you mean by that that they tend to be organisation-specific and uncoordinated. Agencies and donors tend to cherry-pick in relation to a particular situation. There may be good reasons for this. They may have a particular strategy for their approach in a given area, or they may have particular knowledge of it or have partners there. So those individual decisions may be quite rational according to each of those agencies' criteria but, as HPG's study of donor behaviour points out, taken as a whole the system looks irrational. There is a bigger picture of coordination which needs to be taken into account. Getting the assessment process right has some prospect of helping to bridge that coordination gap. What you might want from OCHA field offices is not just a mapping of who is doing what and where, but a coordinated framework both in terms of assessment and response. There are one or two examples where that has been tried. Afghanistan is an interesting example, which worked up to a point. I suspect it is a model which needs to be looked at again. We think that there is a contribution which the assessment process can make to that greater unity of purpose and the ability to prioritise

having got a greater overview of needs.

New speaker: I have just returned from a working group in the United States looking at assessments. We were looking at ways of bringing together the information that US Department of Defence has with that of operational agencies, and looking ahead at possible threats in the future and the risk factors that there might be behind them. Coming from a humanitarian background, I was struck by the sheer wealth of information, tools, objective data and metrics for detailing risk in real-time for almost any spot of the world, as long as you can build a bridge with those operational organisations. I do not see the trust, confidence and natural channels for this existing today. Was the question of how we might tie into those kinds of resources to improve the objectivity of our assessments something which you considered in your report?

James Darcy: I agree that there are sources of information which are not being tapped by humanitarian organisations and which probably need to be. I also think that there is a question of information management which has to be decided by defining quite clearly and ruthlessly what your core concerns are and not always doing the deep-level political analysis and so on. Sometimes you are just as concerned with a symptomatic analysis and proximate causes – what is actually causing this situation now. Knowing what sort of information is needed and when is fundamental.

We found that for some organisations, for example UNHCR, scenario planning is central to their way of working. The evaluation of the Kosovo response highlighted how little access UNHCR seemed to have to relevant intelligence on the likely flow of refugees to Kosovo, which raises the question of who is able to access what kinds of information. There is also a question about the relevance of information. One of the difficulties which managers face is information overload, so our concern was to determine what information is needed, useful, relevant or critical to an appropriate response. To do that requires establishing much more clearly what the criteria are.

New speaker: Trying to count the number of refugees in a refugee camp is often impossible, but the use of satellite photography provides a channel for gathering extraordinarily accurate data which is often impossible when you are on the ground, for example counting the number of refugees in a refugee camp. This technology seems to provide a very succinct quick overview of what the situation is and the ability to monitor it in real time, which I do not see happening in our normal channels.

James Darcy: Our report says that the use of that technology needs to be made available to and

demanded by the relevant coordinators. In particular, population numbers can and should be more accurately established. Information from technologies such as remote imaging have been quite scandalously underused.

New speaker: Thresholds were quite prominent in your report and seemed to be part of the quest to make decision-making neat and easy. From my experience of the use of thresholds in nutrition, I fear that it can result in people ceasing to think. You jump to action because a threshold has been breached, but you do not contextualise or seek to determine the most important response given this context at this time with these people and these resources.

James Darcy: This goes back to the question about judgement and measurement. First of all, I agree that needs must be considered in context. Trying to design a universal template or set of thresholds against which all situations can be judged may not be possible, but there are nonetheless some necessary lines that need to be drawn and there need to be prompts within the system which flag up a situation where there is likely to be, let us say, twenty percent or more global acute malnutrition. It is not acceptable to say that that is normal. At the very least you have to ask the question of why it is happening, what is happening, and whether we doing the right thing in responding as we are. We do not mean to imply anything very mechanistic about an automatic response that follows from a finding that a certain level of malnutrition exists, but we do think that there is a need to have within the system flags that do go up where there is a concern thresholds have been reached. What you then do with that information will depend on the context and the circumstances. But at the moment, there does not seem to be any real check within the system that does that.

Response: My fear is that the system is not responsible enough to do that. My fear is that the system will concentrate on the red flag flying and will respond with knee-jerk reactions.

James Darcy: Working through what checks and balances there are to mitigate that danger was beyond our remit in this report, but I think that that is a fair concern.

New speaker: Firstly, you emphasise that the report is about non-methodological matters, although you have looked at certain methodological issues as a cross-check. How could the non-methodological thinking and findings be used to influence the methodology? Does it need to be? Secondly, did you find that the quality of assessments was affected by who the assessment was done by, what their skills and role was, and how wide or narrow their focus was?

James Darcy: On the link between the questions of process and of methodology, the first point is that I do not think that you can design an appropriate methodology unless you are clear about what the rationale is for doing the assessment in the first place. How would you know what sorts of information you were trying to deliver, to whom and in what form, if you did not know what the use of that information was to be? I think that there has been too little attention paid to that. It has a relevance to what questions are asked through a given methodology, what sorts of information are generated and how accurate that information needs to be. If you are designing a detailed programme response, you will need to be more accurate than if you are trying to decide whether to do a further assessment or determine roughly what scale of resources you are looking at. The decision you are trying to inform is fundamental to the methodological question.

There are questions about the form in which you present your findings and about whether assessments are stand-alone. We think that assessments are valuable products and should be seen as such both within a given organisation and by the humanitarian system as a whole. At the moment they are not, or only an interpretation of them is put on ReliefWeb, but I think that things are improving in that respect and there is a greater level of sharing of results.

I think that it does matter who does the assessment, but it matters less than being clear about what the assessment is trying to do and what the organisation wants from it. Once you are clear about that, hopefully you can select the right people to do it and you should be able to define a fairly consistent methodology to work to. Anyone with experience of practice in the field will know how variable the results can be. The quality of the people is important, especially since judgement is such a crucial element of assessment. But the terms of reference for assessment can be extremely vague and say little more than 'go and have a look', which is not good enough.

Joanna Macrae: There are two representatives of the Montreux group of donors in the room and I wondered whether they could give us some of their thoughts on how one creates incentives for information collection and management in these environments, but also whether there was any update in terms of what was happening with these studies and, if there has been progress, what that might mean?

New speaker: The three studies and a synthesis of them are now available on ReliefWeb along with the three studies. In Geneva last week, the group of donors who commissioned this work went through

the recommendations in the synthesis and none were rejected out-of-hand. Many of the recommendations had already been taken up in the context of the Stockholm conclusions and the implementation plan from the 'good humanitarian donorship' work. In terms of needs assessment, there is agreement in principle that we need to find a way of doing it differently so that we can respond differently. In terms of the modalities of exactly how we do it, I think we need to digest what has been said in this report a bit more fully. I have questions about the nitty-gritty. You have said a lot about process and about how information is used, but I am not quite sure what changes are implied in terms of what is done on the ground, terms of reference and what is looked at.

A lot of the other work in terms of the good donorship implementation plan has a clear process involving lead donors, but there is not as formal a process specifically for taking forward the needs assessment. I think that donors have a role to play in this, but it needs to be more broadly owned and it is critical that we get the UN agencies and the NGOs involved. As yet, we do not seem to have arrived at a process for taking it forward.

New speaker: Does the report take sufficient notice of what information may already exist at local government and national level? Quite often countries have their own records which have been kept for quite a long time, often with previous agency support and from previous situations.

James Darcy: We have deliberately concentrated on the needs assessment process as it is conducted by international agencies and donors. This necessarily involves an assessment of local capacity, which I think is crucial. It is about individuals' own capacities but also about capacities of local and national authorities to provide for those people's needs. Some of the ways in which there is a link between the international and the national is about data sharing and collection. My health colleagues were telling me that little use was made even of existing data sources and that that was problematic, but they also felt that the information contained in those was often judged to be of either uncertain reliability or as being not sufficiently up-to-date. It is practically impossible to generalise about that. It is possible to say that more use could be made of that sort of information, that often parallel systems of information or response systems that either do not tap into existing databases or help to strengthen and build them up, but we found very mixed practice on that and a general scepticism about these sources.

New speaker: I want to make an observation from being in the field. If the emphasis is just on need, there always will be the likelihood that there is going to be a dependency on that relief. I think that if

the profession had a much stronger emphasis on trying to understand the capacities of people, their indigenous strengths, knowledge, resources, assets and skills, and we focused more on that and on mobilising those capacities to meet people's own needs, that then becomes the entry point for intervention to reduce their vulnerabilities and strengthen their resilience.

As you say, at the moment the main emphasis is essentially on the deficit analysis and trying to look at the unmet need, so that the external support comes in and meets that unmet need against some pre-determined Sphere level of dignified whatever. There are arguments about what that level is. Although it is useful having a reference point, the starting point must be that we need much stronger emphasis, training and guidance on how to understand people's inherent capacities and strengths and build the intervention on that.

From an agency perspective, we are living in a system in which the demand for assistance is much greater than the supply and it almost naïve to say that we need to do independent needs assessment because you always have to have a steer on it. Until you are able to address this fundamental imbalance between supply and demand, when agencies or donors or the UN go into the field, they have to have a steer, a sense of the added-value of their organisation, their niche and sectoral competencies and that inevitably makes you focus down. I am not saying that that is right, just that as a pragmatist that is how it will be and the UN will not reach the point of saying they will do a universal needs assessment or appraisal of a particular country or disaster affected area, because the supply is more powerful than demand and people have to make decisions about the allocation of resources.

New speaker: In terms of the decision-making processes, to what extent does this thinking tie in to all the other things that go on at the same time that determine what you do, such as analysis of context, vulnerabilities, capacities, security and overriding political issues. I did not see context analysis in the subheadings, though there are some other aspects that are mentioned.

James Darcy: In terms of local capacity, I think that there are a number of questions. Firstly, people's capacity to respond to stress of various kinds, the strategies they actually adopt, is often too poorly understood. I was surprised to find in Southern Africa that in agencies with longstanding development programmes there had seemed to be remarkably little understanding of how people cope with stress. They had not come overnight and people routinely undergo periods of food insecurity, and yet there was very little understanding of what was happening at the village or family

level. I almost felt like recommending they send a few anthropologists to go and live with these people for a while. It sounds crass. We are concerned with people's capacities, their ability to adapt, the range of options available to them, of which relief is one. This is why we were asking people about what they were assuming about people's level of dependency and what relief had to offer. Are you assuming that what you have to offer is going to save their lives? Responses and assessments are often premised on that presupposition, but it is often not straightforwardly true. There are institutional reasons why it is desirable to say that interventions are lifesaving. I do not think that is saying anything terribly controversial. Sometimes it is true that intervention is the essential element in people's survival and we need to know where those places are as a matter of priority.

I think the question about local mobilisation is a slightly different one, which requires support, preparedness and so on. As I understand it, the definition of the humanitarian agenda is about precisely where those capacities and mechanisms are exceeded. People do not have that capacity any more and that is why there is a rationale and justification for intervening. That is how I would understand the agenda.

I do not see why independent needs assessment is not possible in principle. I can think of some practical reasons why it would not work, and some political reasons. I am not sure that you would ever have a completely independent body conducting needs assessment, because every institution has interests of various kinds, if only in getting the next contract to do an assessment. I think it is worth consideration.

I think it is probably true that demand consistently outstrips supply, but the question is about priority rather than focus per se. I think it is about triage, about asking how we prioritise and what our criteria are for prioritising. If it is true that our resources may not be adequate for whatever is said to be the totality of need, but we need to know what the most critical needs are and say that we will meet at least those. I think that process is a necessary one and is largely what we have been concerned with here.

The way we described assessment in the report includes the four elements of context analysis, needs analysis, risk analysis etc. so context analysis is of course crucial. Somewhere in there is the question of analysis of capacity and vulnerability.

New speaker: Firstly, I feel that the importance of assessment is somewhat overstated as if there is

nothing that comes after that. OFDA has been funding programmes in some countries for over fifteen years. I am sure that in some of those cases the assessment was not very good, but we raised the bar and I do not intend to say that since people in a particular area have been starving at that level for some time already we do not care, but when an agency has been working there for five years, we need to ask what they mean when they say there is no baseline data. I think that there are reports and follow on assessments and eventually you get some pretty good data. In our proposals we tell people to come to us with preliminary data and, if they want to change it a month later, to come back to us and we will change the base of what they said they were going to accomplish based on more recent analysis. This is not to say that that is any panacea but the assessment versus all the other sorts of information, reporting, monitoring is my question. Of course, we know from work that ALNAP is doing that there is not a lot of good monitoring happening either.

Secondly, both DFID's Conflict and Humanitarian Affairs Department (CHAD) and USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) have put a lot of work and resources into the Humanitarian Information Centres (HICs), in terms of raw data, human beings, kit, finances and designing some of the basis premises under which it works. What opportunities do you see for sharing data? OFDA demands it from those it funds. Do you see that as backdoor, because the data needs to be standardised in order to be sharable? People might utilise methodologies or reporting formats that can help grow a global picture of that situation.

James Darcy: We are overstating the significance of assessment if you think of it as a front-end process. What we are saying is that if you are not continually reviewing the assessment, your response to it and the impact of that, you are not doing a proper job of assessment. We take assessment to include those ongoing review, monitoring and adjustment processes. I agree with you that they are fundamental. I think that there are questions about how thorough-going they are. If initial assessments or initial premises are wrong, they need to be challenged. I think it would be healthy for donors in those chronic rolling situations to keep periodically reviewing the rationale for the same programmes continuing when the situation has changed.

In terms of getting people to share data, I think that you are right to say that this is something which is non-negotiable and that this is not something which you can in conscience hold onto. One of the things we say in the report is that donors should be prepared to fund assessments if they are stand-alone assessments, if they are not just part of a pitch for funds, if they are conducted according to a reasonably creditable methodology, and if they are shared within the system. On that basis, we think

that donors should be prepared to fund assessments, but not otherwise. Some agencies can afford to bankroll their own assessments, but I think you can afford to build in incentives there.

New speaker: There has been a lot of investment in the HICs and they seem to be reasonably successful now as they roll out through various emergencies, most recently in Liberia, but they are not an assessment in themselves: they are a mechanism to feed assessment. My own view on this is that we all need to be prepared to take information and be bold about analysis. The further up the chain you go, in general terms, the less we are prepared to comment on what it all means. I think that we have an obligation to put this on the table, to discuss it in sectoral groups and to get to the meat of it, then we can use the deficit methodology to identify how we meet those needs. There is not enough of it in my view, we all need to do better.

New speaker: How do independent assessments tally with consensus building? You may be aware that WFP had a workshop on food aid needs assessment in March this year and we have another meeting next month on technical issues. In WFP we are moving forward on these issues. One of the best examples put forward at the workshop was Tanzania. We had an in-built system in the country which does not require any external organisation to come along and gather the data. There was a consensus built between agencies and the government. I am not sure how an independent assessment would fit into such a situation. I am sure that someone would be welcome to come in and give their own independent advice, but not to go away and write a separate report when you have such a system that creates consensus. I think that capacity building and consensus building is a way forward, though it is difficult. Uganda might be another example where it has been successful.

James Darcy: We are very ambivalent about this idea of independent assessors. I think we saw it as a potential pool of people who could be called upon by the humanitarian coordinator, or the lead agency, or the sectoral working groups, to come and assist them in a given context. I agree that the question of ownership and consensus building is probably fundamental to this. We saw their role not as providing in any sense a separate and over-riding analysis, but a person or people or team who would work with the existing teams on the ground. We think that there is a need for agencies to second people or to give more of their time to those processes.

I agree with you that there are dangers but I think there are also potential benefits and it should not be dismissed out of hand. We started with the idea of a completely independent body being set up to be responsible for this and we thought that that would just divorce responsibility for this in ways that

was very unhelpful.

New speaker: You have said several times that it is probably not so often that you are actually saving lives. We often joke that our job is just to drag people up to their previous level of misery. Many studies, particularly of the UN for the past few years, have pointed to dwindling resources, but recent studies have pointed out that that is not the case, they have just shifted among the agencies. My question is whether there is a shortage of resources for humanitarian assistance or whether it is just being misspent.

New speaker: Following up on my earlier question, what you are proposing is a quite fundamental shift away from a deficit-based assessment of needs towards a risk assessment. There are lots of other things in the report in terms of methodologies for assessments, agreeing thresholds and so on. But how much actual new work would be required in terms of methodology to put this into practice? Are there methodologies out there for assessing needs on the basis of assessing vulnerability and assessing risk? Are there things that you could bring over from the development sphere or that already exist? How much of this is about assembling existing building blocks and agreeing some principles and how much of it requires more research or methodological thought?

New speaker: Earlier on you mentioned that the humanitarian agenda was looking at life, health, subsistence and physical security. I was very interested that you gave attention to subsistence and spelt it out. When we get to the recommendations at the end of the report, I was having difficulty finding subsistence. There are recommendations on food security, but that seems to be all that is left of the subsistence component. My question (perhaps not for today) is, if we were seriously thinking of building assessment around the concept of subsistence, what would you be recommending in order to realise that as something much broader than food security?

James Darcy: Is there a shortage of humanitarian resources or are they just being misspent? Here we are not assuming a humanitarian agenda which is just about saving lives, it is clearly broader than that. But on the other hand, we do think that saving lives is fundamental to this agenda. There are many situations in which claims to life-saving interventions are exaggerated - sometimes grossly exaggerated - largely because the claims about the threat to life were themselves exaggerated. In other words, if you set up a particular problem in a certain way, then you up the stakes, and if people do not die in those numbers you can attribute that to a number of things including your own intervention.

There are certain problems in terms of inflated claims for gauging the effective response. There are times when we do not know what happened. I do not think that we know how many people died in Afghanistan during the last three winters because I do not think that anyone collected the data. How did we find out how many people had died and were dying in DRC? It took an agency, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), to do a mortality survey that caused everyone to stop in horror at what seemed to have happened.

I think that sometimes there is a danger in consensus. Sometimes you need people to come in and say, for example, have you done a mortality survey recently? We need to know what the figures are. There needs to be some scope for both independence of action and also for an external view. In these other cases, such as the DRC, people are not getting the lifesaving assistance that they need. Sometimes this is for good reasons, but too often I think it is because a situation has not been prioritised or portrayed in the way that it should have been and resources have not been allocated accordingly. Whether the total pot is big enough is hard to tell.

How much more work would be needed to refine or define a methodology based on risk analysis. We are not proposing a wholesale revision of existing assessment methodologies, but on the other hand we think there are ways of communicating the results of those assessments in order to make them more relevant to decision-making that can and should include an analysis of risk.

To return to the schematic diagram, a manager wants to know who faces what kinds of risks and in what timeframes. If an assessment does not reveal that, it is not a good assessment from the point of view of a manager deciding funding issues, for example. In general there is too little fit between assessment methodologies and the requirements of decision-makers. That is where the risk analysis comes in. It does not have to be very sophisticated, but no doubt there is more work to be done to determine what would be workable here. Do you want a situation where you could ask a working group, on a scale of one to ten, what level of risk people face and how many people face it? I appreciate that that is too crude, but start with the simple questions. The existing ways in which risk analysis is used are not well adapted to this kind of use. They tend to be adopted from the natural disasters sphere wholesale and to relate to the medium and long-term term rather than acute risk. They are not well adapted to more general use, including conflict situations.

In terms of subsistence, I suspect that that did get a bit lost in the report. We reverted to food security

because that happened to be one of our areas of focus. Most of the recommendations assume a natural application to assessment of subsistence as well as everything else, but it is not spelt out. I am interested to know what you and others consider inherent in that concept. We defined it as not enough access to food but also in terms of access to other basic means of survival, including shelter and water and so on. Is that right? And if so, is it a useful basis of assessment? I agree that we did not really develop that idea.

New speaker: I just wanted to draw your attention to a few initiatives which are happening simultaneously to this study which I think complement some of the recommendations in the report. There is an enormous amount of work on vulnerability and capacity assessment by the Red Cross, manuals, training modules and so on, they have a wealth of experience on that level. Secondly, UNDP's vulnerability index is out there as well. Thirdly, you asked about how to assess protection. I wanted to draw your attention to ALNAP's guidance booklet on how to assess protection, which we will be piloting next year and talking about at the next ALNAP biannual. I think the last recommendation in your report is about the routine analysis of assessment in evaluation. That is part of the ALNAP quality proforma. All of the evaluative reports that ALNAP member agencies give to ALNAP are assessed on the basis of the ALNAP quality proforma which includes a large section on how well they have actually carried out there assessments.

James Darcy: One final point. The question was asked of where do we go with this and what process is there for taking this forward. It is true that there is not a defined process though it links quite closely to the 'good donorship' process. We have been in bilateral contact with the main UN operational agencies and we are going to hold a meeting hosted by UNHCR next month which aims to bring together the UN and SCHR agencies and others to think about the implications of this work. We hope to have a similar event in the United States soon.