Approaches to analysing the impact of humanitarian assistance: a resource guide

This resource guide is one of the outputs of HPG research into approaches to analysing the impact of humanitarian aid. It is based on a literature review, conducted in 2003/2004. It highlights some of the key documents that are useful for humanitarian practitioners interested in aspects of impact assessment. As much as possible, documents available online have been given priority over other documents that may be harder to access.

The subjects covered are:

1) Impact assessment in international development
2) Questions of impact in context: accountability and results-based management
3) Tools and methods for measuring impact
4) Impact assessment in humanitarian practice
5) Useful links
1. Impact assessment in international development

Most of the literature analysing the question of the impact of aid programmes is based on international development aid, rather than humanitarian aid. The documents available in international development therefore form an important and useful body of reference for humanitarian practitioners.

The most comprehensive study of the question of impact is Chris Roche’s Impact Assessment for Development Agencies, conducted in 1999 for Oxfam UK and Novib. David Hulme also gives a useful account of different impact assessment methods in the context of microfinance. Hulme’s work raises wider questions regarding impact assessment, and can be extrapolated beyond the particulars of microfinance. INTRAC also gives a useful account of the issues related to impact assessment. The OECD/DAC provides the most comprehensive and widely-agreed list of definitions in relation to impact.

- INTRAC (2001), NGOs and Impact Assessment (click here).

Other key documents are:


2. Questions of impact in context: accountability and results-based
management

The humanitarian system’s increasing interest in impact needs to be understood in the context of broader debates about accountability for humanitarian aid, and in the context of public management reforms within Western governments.

There is a vast literature on issues of accountability, not cited here. For general debates, see for Humanitarian Exchange, no. 24, July 2003 (click here), or Forced Migration Review, no. 8, August 2000 (click here). ALNAP’s Annual Reviews provide useful information on accountability, learning and performance in the humanitarian sphere (ALNAP website). With regard to the particular question of impact, a number of agencies have set up impact assessment systems in order to improve their accountability at the organisational level. For a discussion of some of these mechanisms, see a report from the British Agencies Aid Group (see below). The 2003 INTRAC Evaluation Conference was on the theme of Management, Measurement and Accountability. All the papers are available at the INTRAC website. ECHO commissioned a study that compares the different quality management tools used by humanitarian agencies, most of them aiming at increasing the accountability and performance of their work.


Increasing interest in the question of impact is largely due to changes in public management in some Western governments: the recent shift from input–output management to so-called results-based management, adopted by several governments, the EU and an increasing number of aid agencies puts stronger pressure on agencies to demonstrate results. The OECD/DAC paper on results-based management provides an overview of the position and systems of a number of agencies, and how their performance measurement system works at project, country and agency levels. A number of agencies and donors have developed their own guidelines for implementing results-based management. Some examples are:

- CIDA (1996) Results-Based Management in CIDA – Policy Statement Prepared by Results-Based Management Division, Performance Review Branch (click here).
- CIDA (2000) RBM handbook on developing result chains (click here).
- OECD/ DAC (2000) Results Based Management in the Development
Cooperation Agencies: A Review of Experience (click here).

- WFP (2003) Information Note on Results-Based Management (click here).

The following authors provide a general account of the origins of results-based management, highlight some of its limits and explore some of its implications for aid agencies.


3. Tools and methods for measuring impact

Some development agencies have developed their own guidelines for impact assessment, and these can be applied to humanitarian contexts. The various guidelines developed by humanitarian agencies for monitoring and evaluation or needs assessments can also be used to design impact assessments. A comprehensive review of needs assessment practice can be found in Darcy, J. and C.-A. Hofmann, According to Need? Needs Assessment and Decision-Making in the Humanitarian Sector (HPG Report 15, September 2003). Save the Children’s Toolkit provides a useful overview of the different approaches. UNHCR’s Evaluation and Policy Evaluation Unit (EPAU) provides useful information on real-time evaluations. Alistair Hallam’s Evaluating Humanitarian Assistance Programmes in Complex Emergencies (HPN Good Practice Review 7, 1998) has a section on impact assessment.

UNHCR (2002) Project Planning in UNHCR (click here). Other UNHCR guidelines are available at the UNHCR eCentre.

The use of indicators is a crucial element in determining the impact of an intervention. The following documents provide clarification about which types of indicators ought to be used in humanitarian assistance. The SMART initiative is advocating for the systematic use of crude mortality and under-five malnutrition indicators.

- SMART Improving the Monitoring, Reporting and Evaluation of Humanitarian Assistance (click here).
- FANTA has developed a series of guides on the use of indicators for USAID Title II programmes (click here).

Some agencies have developed particular guidelines for evaluating the impact of advocacy activities:

There are a number of methodological difficulties in assessing the impact of humanitarian aid. These include a lack of baseline data and difficulties in attribution. Below are some useful examples of how these obstacles can be overcome:


4. Impact assessment in humanitarian practice

On impact assessment in health programmes, see:


On impact assessment in food and nutrition programmes, see:

- Emergency nutrition network online.

5. Useful links

Other useful resources include:

- MEASURE: Monitoring and Evaluation to Assess and Use Results.
- SMART: Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions.
- FANTA: Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance.
- The PARC: Performance Assessment Resource Centre.
- Imp-Act: Improving the Impact of Microfinance on Poverty: Action Research Programme
- EDIAIS: Entreprise Development Impact Assessment Information Service.