

elrha

**From knowing to doing:**  
evidence use in the  
humanitarian sector

Executive Summary

Elrha learning paper



# ABOUT ELRHA

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## **We are Elrha. A global charity that finds solutions to complex humanitarian problems through research and innovation.**

We are an established actor in the humanitarian community, working in partnership with humanitarian organisations, researchers, innovators, and the private sector to tackle some of the most difficult challenges facing people all over the world.

We equip humanitarian responders with knowledge of what works, so that people affected by crises get the right help when they need it most. We have supported more than 200 world-class research studies and innovation projects, championing new ideas and different approaches to evidence what works in humanitarian response. Elrha has two successful humanitarian programmes: Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC) and the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF).

The R2HC aims to improve health outcomes for people affected by humanitarian crises by strengthening the evidence base for public health interventions. Our globally-recognised research programme focuses on maximising the potential for public health research to bring about positive change and transform the effectiveness of humanitarian response.



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# FOREWORD

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## **Elrha's Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC) programme has supported more than 80 studies since its inception in 2013.**

We seek to ensure that all research we fund has a positive impact and contributes to improving the public health response in humanitarian crises. Supporting research teams to increase the uptake of their research by humanitarian practitioners and policy-makers has become an increasingly important focus of our work. We support academics and their humanitarian partners to identify and overcome the 'barriers to uptake' which this paper explores. There are multiple barriers to uptake, some of which research teams can address more easily than others. Institutional barriers, which characterise both the humanitarian system and academia, are among the most challenging to overcome.

There is a moral imperative to understand and improve the pathways by which research informs humanitarian policy and practice. In 2021, 235 million people will need humanitarian assistance and protection. The UN and its partners will need to mobilise \$35 billion to meet the needs of people affected by crisis. In these difficult times, with donor countries facing the fiscal challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic at home, it's possible that some of these humanitarian needs will not be met. In this context, research that aims to improve our response to humanitarian crises must be able to navigate the complex pathways to inform and influence those who are best positioned to use and apply evidence.

We commissioned this paper recognising that, although there seems to be consensus that research uptake is difficult in the humanitarian sector, there

is a limited understanding of why barriers appear so intractable. We were interested to know how we could address barriers more effectively; what 'good' research uptake looked like; and how we – as producers and funders of research in humanitarian settings - could better support success. This paper explores and seeks to answer these questions. As the paper highlights, engaging with humanitarian contexts is an increasing area of interest and funding in academia.

We need to ensure that research conducted in such settings is relevant and useful for humanitarian stakeholders and – critically – that when new evidence is available there are clear pathways for its use. Advancements by research teams and humanitarian organisations to improve evidence use pathways, while significant, may not be enough to drive all the changes required to truly connect humanitarian research with policy and practice. While the paper does not claim to have all the answers, we hope it provides clear starting points for dialogue and action.

Recommendations from the paper will directly inform guidance and support offered through the R2HC and we hope will also prompt other research funders, humanitarian organisations and academics to reflect on their roles in improving the use and application of evidence.

We hope the paper will spark ideas and the joint action needed to build a better ecosystem for humanitarian evidence use. We look forward to engaging with partners to turn these ideas into action and welcome your comments or feedback.

**Anne Harmer**, Head of R2HC  
**Cordelia Lonsdale**, R2HC Research Impact Manager

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This learning paper was written by:

 **Anna Paterson**, an international development consultant with more than 15 years of experience in research, monitoring and evaluation, and learning.

 **Fred Carden**, an evaluation specialist with over 30 years' experience in evaluating development research and programming, and the development of evaluation methodologies.

 **Teresa Hanley**, an independent consultant active in research, evaluation, programme development and communication on humanitarian and social development issues.

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Gavin Wood and Kerry Albright (UNICEF), Temesgen Bocher and Michael O'Donnell (Save the Children), Gloria Seruwagi (Makerere University), Jeannie Annan and Anjini Mishra (International Rescue Committee) and Catherine Mears (British Red Cross, retired).

The views expressed in this paper are those of interviewees, round table participants, and the authors and are not necessarily those of Elrha.

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**NIHR** | National Institute for Health Research

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EXECUTIVE  
SUMMARY



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## **In the past decade, the amount of research evidence targeted at improving humanitarian practice has increased.**

Humanitarian organisations have made progress in both producing and engaging with research. However, despite global commitments and several initiatives to share and broker evidence – both within and outside humanitarian organisations – barriers to using research to inform humanitarian policy and practice still exist. This learning paper explores the current landscape of humanitarian research evidence, based on a literature review and consultation process with humanitarian stakeholders. While there is a particular focus on health evidence, we believe that the learning can be applied more broadly.

We find four basic barriers to using research evidence: time pressures; funding constraints; lack of relevance to humanitarian practice; and lack of relevance to humanitarian actors in the Global South. This paper explores common success factors and approaches that support research use, with case studies documenting examples of good practice. Many of these practices are already well known but can be difficult to implement due to political economy constraints in both humanitarian and academic sectors.

We conclude that individual study teams or evidence brokers may struggle to overcome barriers to uptake alone. Coordinated action – driven by research funders, humanitarian donors and humanitarian organisations – is needed to foster an ‘ecosystem’ for humanitarian evidence use.

“Coordinated action is needed to foster an ‘ecosystem’ for humanitarian evidence use.”

The COVID-19 pandemic may provide momentum for this change agenda, having demonstrated the centrality of evidence for effective humanitarian response, leading to the increased participation of humanitarian actors in the Global South.

However, the humanitarian system is also undergoing profound change. The changing landscape will affect evidence production and use in the humanitarian system and should be taken into account when considering how to action the following recommendations.

We propose six action areas for these humanitarian stakeholders:



**Partnerships:** Create, invest and participate in more sustained, diverse humanitarian-practitioner research partnership models, particularly to foster engagement beyond a single project.



**Global South leadership:** Fund and support research led by the Global South – invest in building capacity for grant management, as well as research practice.



**Evidence brokering:** Expand the range of evidence-brokering services and functions within and between organisations – brokers play a critical role in translating and communicating research evidence for humanitarian users, drawing out its operational relevance and engaging stakeholders in evidence.



**Research translation and application:** Increase funding, resources and focus on:

- understanding the implications of research findings and translating them into actionable recommendations for humanitarian practice
- implementing evidence-based recommendations
- developing the field of humanitarian 'implementation research'



**Humanitarian data:** Improve the quality of humanitarian data – increase opportunities for data use in evidence synthesis and other research processes.



**Humanitarian leadership:** Provide leadership from the top of humanitarian organisations to promote the importance of staff's engagement with evidence and its pathways through to practice.



We find four basic barriers to using research evidence: time pressures; funding constraints; lack of relevance to humanitarian practice; and lack of relevance to humanitarian actors in the Global South.



## Recommendations

The overall thrust of this paper highlights the need for a significant step change in current efforts to close the gap between the research and humanitarian worlds.

All stakeholders should consider the full 'pathway to evidence use' to be a shared responsibility, from identifying the research agenda through to applying evidence.

We recommend action in six key areas (Table 1), involving key actors in humanitarian research and response. These support closer collaboration, while maximising the strengths of each actor.

We include recommendations that we believe are necessary to maximise evidence use, but we recognise that some will be easier to achieve than others. These are listed in a matrix that makes it clear which actors could be responsible for implementing recommendations.

## Six action areas for improving evidence use in the humanitarian sector



Partnerships



Global South leadership



Evidence brokering



Research translation and application



Humanitarian data



Humanitarian leadership

**Table 1:** Six action areas with recommendations for improving use of research evidence in the humanitarian sector

Action area	Recommendation	Humanitarian agencies and organisations	Funders/donors	Researchers and research organisations
<b>1. Partnerships:</b> create, invest and participate in more sustained, diverse humanitarian-practitioner research partnership models	a) Build long-term relationships and engagement between research institutions and humanitarian organisations at different levels (national, regional, global) that go beyond single projects	✓		✓
	b) Fund and use co-production models including with national government actors, especially where these actors are critical intended users of research	✓	✓	✓
	c) Participate in interagency and sector-wide processes to set research agendas and identify collective evidence needs	✓		✓
<b>2. Global South leadership:</b> increase the proportion of resources directed to research led by the Global South – include investment in capacity for grant management as well as research practice	a) Ensure research funding is available and accessible to Southern-led humanitarian research – establish a proportion of research funds that will be Southern led		✓	
	b) Ensure humanitarian agencies' country offices and Southern partners, as well as headquarters, have equal access to opportunities for engagement with research including in setting organisations' own evidence agendas – build this into partnership agreements	✓		
	c) Foster relationships between humanitarian agencies at the country level with in-country/regional research institutions, so partnerships are built that can respond to future needs for evidence and opportunities for research collaboration	✓		✓
	d) Increase collaboration with research and educational institutes in crisis-affected regions in a way that builds their recognition and capacity – this builds momentum behind existing commitments to localise humanitarian research and education within regions and communities affected by crises	✓	✓	

Action area	Recommendation	Humanitarian agencies and organisations	Funders/donors	Researchers and research organisations
<b>3. Evidence brokering:</b> expand the scale and influence of research-brokering services and functions within and between organisations.	a) Enhance humanitarian organisations' internal evidence-brokering capacities and support evidence-brokering networks, services and platforms	✓	✓	
	b) Increase the focus of brokering organisations and activities to reach humanitarian actors in the Global South, in field as well as central positions	✓	✓	
	c) Share lessons between organisations on how brokers have drawn out operational relevance of research, and the skills and processes that make for effective brokering in the humanitarian sector.	✓	✓	
<b>4. Research translation and application:</b> intensify the focus of resources and attention applied to understanding the implications of research findings for humanitarian actors and practice	a) Financially support the application of research, including the resources needed to make recommended changes evidenced by research in humanitarian operational processes	✓	✓	
	b) Support the development of more consistent methods, approaches and guidance to implementation research in humanitarian response, learning from the growing examples of its use – consider funding to support the development of humanitarian implementation research as a field	✓	✓	✓
	c) Ensure all research calls for proposals, and proposals themselves, require in their design sufficient resourcing for researchers to engage with policy and programming processes, including plans for how applications will be supported when appropriate – maintain research dissemination funds that humanitarian organisations and researchers can access after research has been completed	✓	✓	✓
	d) Foster and support ethical engagement of communities affected by crisis with research, including returning to them to present findings, in line with ethical research design and practice – be mindful that communities are often the most important ultimate users of research	✓	✓	✓

Action area	Recommendation	Humanitarian agencies and organisations	Funders/donors	Researchers and research organisations
<b>5. Humanitarian data:</b> enhance the quality of humanitarian data and increase opportunities for its use in evidence synthesis and other research processes	a) Be mindful of ethical, security and privacy considerations relating to data of people affected by crises – increase opportunities to make anonymised data accessible for research use including to fill evidence gaps (eg. through shared platforms and data-sharing agreements)	✓	✓	✓
	b) Increase the quality of routinely collected humanitarian data in monitoring and evaluation, such as by making explicit the methodology for sampling and data collection, disaggregation and consistent use of units (eg. household definitions, others) to enable its aggregation and synthesis (in anonymised formats)	✓		
<b>6. Humanitarian leadership:</b> provide leadership from the top of humanitarian organisations to champion and promote evidence use	a) Involve humanitarian field- and operational-level staff in discussions around new evidence and its implications for programme or policy change	✓		
	b) Build consideration of staff involvement in evidence-into-practice processes and partnership building, into annual appraisal systems	✓		
	c) Provide time and space for operational staff to read, reflect, discuss and participate in research processes, with particular attention to staff and partners in field roles	✓		
	d) Support the training and involvement of humanitarian operational staff in research methods and production	✓		

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