

ELRHA'S RESEARCH FOR HEALTH IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES (R2HC) AND THE AFRICAN POPULATION AND HEALTH RESEARCH CENTER (APHRC)

2025 RESEARCH FORUM

BACKGROUND NOTE FOR PARTICIPANTS AND CONTRIBUTORS

Elrha's Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC) and the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) will host a 3-day Forum in Nairobi, Kenya between 7-9 May, 2025. This background note expands on the Forum objectives and focus topics for stakeholders interested in engaging with the event¹.

KEY TERMS

Humanitarian: R2HC aims to strengthen the evidence base for public health interventions in humanitarian crises, primarily crises driven by conflict, climate-related disaster, infectious disease outbreak and involuntary movement of people. We contribute to better health outcomes for people affected by crisis, including refugees, host communities, and internally displaced persons (IDPs). We target our resources primarily towards acute, complex and protracted crisis settings. When designing the Forum content, we will consider relevance of sessions to such contexts.

For current crises, UN OCHA (the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) provides a [global humanitarian overview](#) that lists countries and regions in which people currently require humanitarian assistance and protection. [ACAPS](#) provides an analysis of humanitarian crises by severity level.

Health: A broad framing of mental and physical health and wellbeing is used, to reflect the broad range of humanitarian interventions that save lives, build resilience and promote improved health outcomes for people affected by crisis.

¹ Objective 4 of the Forum, "Fostering Collaboration and Participation", is a cross-cutting objective not covered in this note.

FORUM OBJECTIVES AND AIMS:

OBJECTIVE 1: GALVANISING ACTION ON EVIDENCE GAPS FOR CLIMATE-INDUCED HEALTH IMPACTS

Objective:

Galvanise the humanitarian health research community and research funders to actively engage in addressing the health consequences of the climate crisis in existing humanitarian settings.

Expected outcomes/outputs:

- A. Increased awareness and commitment to addressing climate-induced health challenges in humanitarian settings among the humanitarian health research and practitioner community of practice.
- B. Establish a network of interested stakeholders who can collaborate on follow up activities to galvanise action and advocate for funding on this topic.

Background:

Climate change is an urgent problem facing populations living in contexts affected by humanitarian crisis. Climate change acts as a threat multiplier, which alters interconnections between contributing factors and creates new risks and interactions between pre-existing events (e.g. displacement, conflict). These concurrent shocks and interconnected risks lead to even more complex crisis, including simultaneous occurrence of several catastrophic events also referred to as a “[polycrisis](#)”. A polycrisis lens is useful to explore and understand the connections between contributing factors, vulnerabilities and risks. It is an approach that builds on the foundations of good public health practice which recognises there are a wide interrelated set of socio-economic-political and environmental determinants of health outcomes. A recent [situational analysis published by Elrha](#) highlights the significant evidence gap on this topic, and the need for increased engagement and visibility of humanitarian actors and researchers in dialogue on climate and health.

Approach:

The Forum aims to foster knowledge exchange, provide a space to learn from cutting edge, rigorous, and/or novel research and evaluation findings, and engage researchers, funders, and humanitarian partners to galvanise robust and impactful research in this area. Panels and presentations will explore the intersection of humanitarian health and the climate emergency, encourage interdisciplinary collaboration, and promote awareness of gaps to guide future research initiatives. The R2HC Forum will be held in connection with [the Fogarty-led Global Forum on Humanitarian Health Research \(GFH2R\)](#) and this objective will be a particular focus of collaboration. We anticipate a day of joint sessions.

OBJECTIVE 2: SHIFTING POWER TO LOWER-AND-MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES (LMICS)

Objective:

Learn from the experience and perspectives of others on empowering researchers and humanitarian experts from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) to determine research priorities, on equitable allocation of resources, and on approaches which enable LMIC researchers to initiate and lead high quality research.

Expected outcomes/outputs:

- A. Improved understanding of models of shifting the power in global health research partnerships towards researchers and humanitarian actors from low and middle-income countries.
- B. Ideas contributed to inform the development of Elrha's approach to shifting the power, including our ambition to secure funding for research calls that target LMIC actors and the design of future calls for proposals.

Background:

There is an imbalance in funding, voice and power both in the global health research ecosystem, and between institutions that are responding to crises in the humanitarian ecosystem. A key finding of Elrha's report, [Global Insights: The Humanitarian Research and Innovation Landscape 2024](#), was that both resources and power are skewed towards the priorities of actors in High Income Countries (HIC). This dominance risks silencing the priorities and needs of communities affected by crisis. Empowering diverse voices and fostering equitable partnerships are paramount for meaningful change, but has been challenging in practice. Calls for 'shifting the power' continue among both humanitarian and academic actors². Both structural and systemic shifts are required, including [greater direct action from funders and donors](#) to change the status quo, as well as dedicated efforts by researchers, organisations, and institutions. The call to 'shift power' aims to ensure researchers and humanitarian experts from LMICs provide significant contributions to international research partnerships, to respect and value local expertise and ensures research contributes to more meaningful and sustainable outcomes.

² See for example: Center for Humanitarian Leadership and Rights CoLab (2021) '[Transformation in the aid and development sector?](#)'; Maria Faciolince (2020) '[#PowerShifts Resources: Anti-Racism in Development and Aid](#)', From Poverty to Power blog; Kumar, R., Khosla, R., & McCoy, D. (2024). [Decolonising global health research: Shifting power for transformative change](#). *PLOS Global Public Health*, 4(4), e0003141 and Fitzpatrick, M. and Atem, T. (2023, October 2). '[Co-investigators but with different power](#)': [Local voices on the localization of humanitarian research](#). Tufts - Feinstein International Center.

Approach:

Through a variety of modalities, we will showcase, explore and highlight positive examples of how power can be shifted to researchers and humanitarian experts in LMICs and effective coordination and communication facilitated in research collaborations. We are particularly interested in contributions and case examples which identify specific barriers, practical solutions, and actionable recommendations for researchers, donors and institutions. The Forum aims to platform perspectives from the research study/project level, and from individuals representing institutions, funders, and other key stakeholders in the humanitarian health research ecosystem.

OBJECTIVE 3: PROMOTING RESEARCH QUALITY, ETHICS, AND IMPACT:

Objective:

Showcase and promote approaches to strengthen the quality, ethics, and impact of research in humanitarian settings. This includes sharing exemplary projects from the Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC) portfolio and the lessons learned from evaluating the impact of R2HC's research studies over the past 10 years.

Expected outcomes/outputs:

- A. Innovative research methodologies that take into account the needs and challenges of researchers in crisis-affected settings, and new approaches from the community of practice in addressing challenges in research ethics, which can be shared to enable learning and foster good practice.
- B. Awareness raised of studies from the community of practice which have effectively influenced policy and practice, including platforming case examples of research funded by R2HC, and the R2HC Research Impact Framework
- C. Dialogue advanced on good practice in research uptake and dissemination with crisis-affected communities.

Background

Research methods and study designs

Humanitarian crises by their very nature pose challenges to conducting high-quality and experimental research due to the complex and highly changeable contexts encountered and the instability and vulnerability of displaced and crisis-affected populations. Study designs must be conducive to rigorous and effective research, but often require flexibility to suit the environment and particular ethical challenges relating to protection of the population. At the same time, methodologies are available using innovative design and analytical approaches that can be modified for humanitarian research: e.g. quasi-experimental, experimental, analytical

observational designs in lieu of randomized trials, the advent of statistical and mathematical modelling and machine learning approaches, as well as more robust anthropological, participatory and other qualitative or mixed-methods approaches.

Community engagement in research

A growing discourse focuses on participatory study designs, research tools and mechanisms that facilitate the [ethical engagement of communities affected by crisis](#), enabling them to have voice in research processes and to ensure research addresses community needs and priorities. This may include referral pathways to link research and implementation activities, Community Advisory Boards and welfare committees, and community feedback dialogues or forums that actively involve communities in research decision-making, ensuring that their voices are heard and respected throughout the research process. R2HC's recent Literature Review [Understanding Community Engagement for Evidence Uptake in Humanitarian Settings](#) notes that the (potential) role of communities in uptake and application of findings, and good 'restitution of findings' practices, is little understood, and knowledge exchange on participatory approaches and community engagement in humanitarian health research should be a key priority.

Research ethics

The context of a humanitarian crisis creates a unique environment for research ethics, over and above the important issues relating to community engagement covered above. Considerations include the urgency (or otherwise) of initiating research soon after an acute crisis, potential dangers and insecurity in the location, lack of resources, and access challenges. Humanitarian crises also create a complex combination of vulnerabilities, which must be central to ethical reflection and considered throughout the research process. Since the publication of the [R2HC Research Ethics Tool](#) in 2017, discourse has continued on the [ethics of research partnerships](#), the ethics of [engaging in conflict-affected contexts](#), ethical and culturally sensitive research frameworks and protocols, on the role of [ethical review boards](#), and on the use of [digital tools for data collection and analysis](#).

Research uptake and impact

While the evidence base for humanitarian health response has grown over the past decade in response to demand, the impact of that research on humanitarian policy and practice has not kept pace. There are multiple barriers for humanitarian researchers and their partners in translating evidence into use. Drawing on R2HC's experience, desk analysis of R2HC's [collection of impact case studies](#) and a review of available literature, the [Research Impact Framework](#) was developed. This outlines five strategies and nine enablers that are characteristics of high-impact studies in humanitarian health. There is a continued need to foster knowledge exchange on key topics, such as study designs and methodologies that can facilitate uptake of findings, modes of knowledge translation and dissemination that can 'shift power' to

actors in low and middle-income countries, and the effective harnessing of emerging media channels and social networks for promoting uptake of quality evidence by practitioners, particularly those on the 'front lines' of humanitarian response.

Approach:

Organise thematic sessions on novel study designs and research methodologies, ethical tools, frameworks and guidance, and strategies for maximising the impact of humanitarian health research, including lessons learned in relation to engaging communities in the uptake of research findings. The focus will be on what we as a sector have learned in the last 10 years. Through curated and invited contributions, we will also provide a platform for R2HC grantees to share best practices and lessons learned in successfully engaging humanitarian practitioners and policymakers in the uptake of research findings.