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Evaluation of Disaster and Emergency Management: Do No Harm, But Do Better

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Abstract

The authors identify key issues for the improvement of evaluations of disaster and emergency management. The value of an interagency approach is discussed, as is the importance of the crossover lessons from international and domestic evaluation efforts. The authors discuss specific ways evaluation is tied to the larger context of guidelines and standards in humanitarian assistance.
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Evaluating disaster and emergency assistance is an emerging focus in evaluation, an extension and refinement of development activity with a longer history. Working in the highly charged environment of a large-scale disaster can be difficult and dangerous. In extreme situations, evaluators are exposed to risks to their safety as they attempt to do their work.

Difficult and dangerous though it may be to conduct an evaluation of disaster assistance either during a relief effort or soon after, it is a critical component of emergency management. Without assessing the effectiveness of aid, funders, providers, and people on the ground will be unable to make

informed decisions about efficient delivery of assistance in the current crisis, or learn lessons in anticipation of the next disaster. Past decisions and future plans on any aspect of relief efforts will inevitably impact the outcomes of other aspects. And these all happen within the context of social, demographic, cultural, political, legal, environmental, and technological challenges.

Evaluation findings, when credible and properly understood, can influence policy directly related to protecting and saving lives. This makes it critical to complete evaluations in a timely fashion, since results will affect the provision of services when lives are at stake.

Internationally, assessing the effectiveness, efficiency, and impact of humanitarian assistance has increased over the past 20 years from a handful of evaluations in the early 1990s to a situation where the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (www.alnap.org) has now catalogued many hundreds of evaluations. But experience at the international level has not translated so well to the national level. There is a clear movement internationally toward interagency and systemwide evaluation efforts. This strategic momentum shows promise for maximizing limited resources, enhancing the explanatory power of evaluation, increasing potential for obtaining useful information, and then delivering it to those who need it in a timely fashion.

But domestically, this systemwide assessment strategy is still in its infancy as demonstrated, for instance, by the response to Hurricane Katrina in the United States. The absence of a single stakeholder in the health and nutrition sector, for example, with overall authority for evaluation policy implementation and control of resources, adds to the complexity of evaluation efforts in that arena. Lessons learned from these efforts demonstrate the need to strengthen technical issues and governance, critical to advancing future evaluation efforts.

A coordinated evaluation strategy requires the inclusion of affected populations throughout the process. But ensuring that affected populations, whether viewed as victims, survivors, or beneficiaries, are appropriately involved requires persistence on the part of investigators. It takes more than lip service. The time has come for more concerted efforts on this front. It will take considerable effort to establish community ties and capabilities in advance of a crisis, where that's possible, or quickly after the onset of a disaster.

If we consider evaluation experience in this arena as a continuum, with the most experience on one end and the least experience on the other, there is much distance between those operating internationally and those working exclusively with a national context. There is a critical need for direct communication and the sharing of experiences among international and national organizations and individuals engaged in disaster and emergency evaluation.

Evaluation lessons following Hurricane Katrina, not to mention preparedness and response, could have been better informed by previous work

in the global context. This is not to say that those operating in the international arena have mastered every issue. Rather, they are faced with many methodological challenges and so are more aware of potential pitfalls and solutions. Moreover, there may be things that those working internationally can learn from others with a fresh perspective—things they may have learned long ago, but now take for granted.

Evaluation Activities Informed by Humanitarian Assistance Standards

Not surprisingly, but worth noting, a number of evaluation issues are connected to international humanitarian standards and guidelines. Several independent agencies came together to further develop emergency response standards in the aftermath of the multiagency evaluation, *The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience* (Steering Committee of the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, 1996). Indeed, the Rwanda genocide was a watershed event for many aspects of humanitarian strategy and tactics. Among the advances were the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative, The Sphere Project, ALNAP, the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies, and the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership. Coalitions created to improve emergency response such as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, the Emergency Capacity Building Project, the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition, and the Clinton NGO Impact Initiative also collaborated on elaborating guidelines to enhance their effectiveness. The current disaster in Haiti will be a test of what has been learned in the past ten years about coalitions' roles in disaster response and evaluation.

Less evident is the extent to which these various standards may be used in designing and implementing evaluations. There is little doubt that evaluation codes of conduct intersect with those of humanitarian organizations. Independence, neutrality, and impartiality are a few themes coincidental to disaster response and evaluation. Evaluators will continue to draw on these and other established standards to frame needs assessment, monitoring, and evaluation activities both internationally and domestically with the aim of achieving a more responsive approach.

In the United States and other national jurisdictions, efforts to develop standards and guidelines are lagging, leaving the various U.S. sectors behind those with more exposure to and experience with mass disasters. This may be largely attributed to the fact that the United States and Western European countries have not encountered disasters on the scale of those faced by many other nations. But in the aftermath of 9/11 and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the learning curve steepened. The 2010 earthquake in Haiti is the most recent example. Evaluators are finding themselves in new territory. Many are seeking to address increased demands for transparency, accountability, and learning in a variety of sectors concerned with disaster preparedness,

response, and recovery. Evaluators must also navigate these traditional phases of disaster in relation to broader issues of community resilience.

Methodological Issues. In general, it is most important to focus on the type of evaluation approach used in the context of disaster and emergency management rather than prescribing certain methods. The most important evaluation approaches in disaster and emergency management are developmental, formative or real-time evaluation, and summative. The key emphasis is on the intended *use* of evaluation findings, and we believe that a utilization focus should drive methodological approaches. Arguably, the methodological issues associated with evaluation in disaster and emergency settings are similar to those in other situations. The case may also be made that these issues are heightened by contextual factors outlined above and discussed throughout this volume. Perhaps the most important lessons learned by evaluators has been that classical designs and approaches, such as experimental designs and survey methods, cannot be rapidly transferred and applied in disaster contexts without adjustment or consideration of social, developmental, and cultural context. With that said, the fact that there are significant challenges associated with conducting evaluations in the emergency and disaster arena is not an excuse for poorly designed evaluations or shoddy implementation. Rather, evaluators should acknowledge the methodological limitations, closely examine their implications within broad minimum and maximum standards, and work creatively to advance our efforts to attend to and address those shortcomings. Real-time evaluation (RTE) and efforts to modify standard data collection strategies like survey methods within the ever-changing context of disasters and emergencies are both examples of ways that evaluation methods are being adapted.

Increasing Access to Evaluation Results. In addition to increasing the quantum of evaluation activities during the various phases of disaster and emergency management, there has been an increase in access to and the use of evaluation results. Access to evaluation findings and reports has improved over the past several years, as a result of initiatives such as ALNAP. Not only are evaluation results and recommendations more readily available in the public domain through posting on the Web, but evaluations are collectively analyzed with policy and programming aims in mind. The implications are discussed in regular gatherings of evaluators and program practitioners, as evidenced, for example, in the creation of a topical interest group of the American Evaluation Association focusing specifically on disaster and emergency management evaluation. Moreover, evaluation products are more closely scrutinized in terms of technical quality through metaevaluation efforts. Pressure to post evaluation findings and to have explicit organization statements that disclose managements' responses to evaluation recommendations will continue to mount.

Conclusion

There is an old adage: “To know what you know, and to know what you don’t know, is to know.” Evaluation and monitoring of disaster relief can contribute to both what we know and what we don’t know. Evaluation is a process that discerns what can be known with some certainty, and can help to provide a clear vision of targets for the future.

Reference

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