THE RESEARCH IMPACT FRAMEWORK

Strengthening the Impact of Humanitarian Health Research on Policy and Practice

Briefing Note, September 2023

OVERVIEW

While humanitarian research and the evidence base has grown over the past decade, responding 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. Practical guidance to produce research with greater impact is sought after by researchers and their partners.

This briefing provides background information on the Research Impact Framework designed to help meet this need and strengthen the impact of humanitarian health research on policy and practice. Developed by Elrha's Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC) programme, the Framework - available as a separate document - outlines success strategies that researchers can use to deliver research impact, and enablers which can facilitate evidence-to-practice impact pathways. The Framework is shared for immediate use, as well as to prompt dialogue which can inform improvements of the Framework itself and the development of further useful tools for the humanitarian health research community.

BACKGROUND

THE NEED TO STRENGTHEN THE IMPACT OF RESEARCH ON HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Complex humanitarian emergencies remain a major global health challenge.[i] Humanitarian public health interventions and programmes should be based on best available evidence. While over the past decade the evidence base has significantly increased, overall research evidence is still of limited quantity and quality, in part due to the operational challenges of conducting research in relevant settings.[ii,iii,iv] The academic community has been called on to fill these evidence gaps.[v] Producing more evidence is expected to drive forward new or improved policies, interventions or practices that improve the health and wellbeing of people affected by crisis. However, the availability of research does not necessarily lead to its application to humanitarian decision-making, unless strategies are applied by researchers to translate academic, peer-reviewed research into evidence which can be applied by humanitarian policymakers and practitioners.[vi, vii] Implementing these strategies to deliver uptake of research in humanitarian settings is challenging, with barriers including time and resource constraints for both researchers and humanitarian actors.[viii] This can limit the impact of humanitarian research on real-world change; for example, a recent review of mental health and psychosocial support intervention research found that its impacts on policy and practices had not kept pace with evidence production.[ix] Practical guidance for overcoming the barriers to evidence use and uptake is much sought after to ensure humanitarian health research – often publicly funded – can deliver the type of change that benefits affected people as intended.

THE R2HC AND ITS IMPACT CASE STUDIES

Elrha's R2HC has funded over 100 research studies since 2013 to deliver new evidence across a range of health topics. One of the few actors with a mandate to fund research studies in humanitarian crisis settings, R2HC also delivers programmatic activities to build and strengthen the quality and impact of research partnerships; inform humanitarian research priority setting and gap analyses; and engage key stakeholders in research evidence. All studies funded by R2HC are made up of partnerships between academic researchers and humanitarian operational actors. Since 2019, all research teams must include at least one research partner from the country where it is taking place – typically a low- and middle-income country (LMIC) affected by humanitarian crises or hosting refugees.

The case studies are an evaluation approach used by R2HC to document and evidence impact of funded research. First introduced in 2019, they were selected as the primary evaluation method to evidence the impact of funded grants, and importantly, to better understand pathways and strategies which achieve impact and understand common success factors for impactful research-practice partnerships to inform future grant-making. The impact case studies are developed using a

Contribution Analysis approach, interviewing research teams and partners, and triangulating reported impacts with key stakeholder interviews and documentary evidence.

A collection of summaries of these case studies was launched in 2023[x] to inform the humanitarian health research community.

DEVELOPING THE RESEARCH IMPACT FRAMEWORK

Drawing on the experience of R2HC over ten years, desk analysis of the collection of case studies and a review of available literature, a "Research Impact Framework" was developed. This outlines success strategies and enablers that are characteristics of high-impact studies in humanitarian health.

The development process is indebted to the work of the Institute of Development Studies on "Three interconnected qualities for driving impact from research in international development,"[xi] as well as reviews of literature and R2HC's own programmatic outputs already cited. Seven of the points in the framework are synthesised from existing literature and were further validated through analysis of the 20 R2HC impact case studies.

We added new characteristics based on our analysis, aiming for the Framework to reflect what strategies and enablers facilitate impactful research specifically in humanitarian crisis contexts. For example, recognising the social nature of humanitarian decision-making[xii] and the role of networks and shared platforms for communicating evidence to humanitarian practitioners, we added the strategy 'Socialise Ideas' and validated its presence in our case studies. To increase relevance of the Framework for humanitarian researchers, who come from diverse backgrounds and disciplines, we also adapted and reframed some existing concepts, striving for language and concepts which are clear, relevant and actionable.

THE KEY CONCEPTS

The Framework presents 'enablers of impact' and 'strategies for impact' which are common factors in research projects that successfully influence humanitarian policy and practice.

- 'Enablers of impact' are conditions that are in place pre-grant. They include existing connections; contextual conditions (such as the funding environment); and research team skills and attributes. These may be factors which are not within the direct control of a research team to change, and which may need to be addressed through specific strategies as part of a research study.
- 'Strategies for impact' reflect proactive decisions made by research teams during proposal development or research production, or analysis and dissemination, and enable teams to take advantage of favourable conditions set by 'enablers'.

Both enablers and strategies appear to be important to varying degrees for high impact, though it is not yet clear if some are more significant than others.

APPLYING THE RESEARCH IMPACT FRAMEWORK

Our ambition is for the proposed Framework to provide a useful prompt for humanitarian health researchers, their partners, and funders, in designing and implementing impactful research. The enablers may be more relevant for those leading proposal development or reviewing proposals from an impact perspective, while the strategies may be useful for those delivering and implementing research. The Framework lends itself to the development of further tools for researchers and research funders, which we plan to do.

HOW RESEARCHERS CAN APPLY THE FRAMEWORK TO PLANNED OR ONGOING RESEARCH

1) Considering a specific research study, team, and context, review and assess the presence of **enablers**.
   - Missing enablers in the 'Research Consortium Attributes' and 'Existing Connections' can potentially be addressed through the inclusion of new partners or establishment of new relationships with external stakeholders before undertaking a research study. If this is not possible, these gaps can be considered in the development of stakeholder engagement and communications strategies, or simply recognised (and ideally, considered within end-project evaluations of impact).
   - Missing enablers in the 'Context' should prompt further discussion. They could be the focus of specific strategies to be deployed during the study – for example, if there is low demand for your research, could engagement and the production of new evidence stimulate a demand? If funding for implementation is lacking, could research contribute evidence on resource requirements, or engage with advocacy efforts targeting donors?
   - Alternatively, if context enablers are missing, researchers may decide to adapt the research to increase its relevance to humanitarian policy and funding priorities; or to simply recognise the gaps and adapt expectations for impact accordingly.

2) Develop a stakeholder engagement and communications approach for the research study as early as possible. Consider all five **strategies** and incorporate any priorities resulting from the review of **enablers**. In planning and executing the strategy, all research partners should play an active role. Allocate resource and time to execute the strategies, and ideally, to evaluate their effectiveness and the team's learning at the end of the study.

THE FIVE STRATEGIES IN ACTION: EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

The examples of strategies in action are shared here recognising that researchers may find additional detail on what strategies can entail useful. We recommend exploring the full library of R2HC case studies for more examples of good practice, and some exploration of when the enablers can contribute to impact.
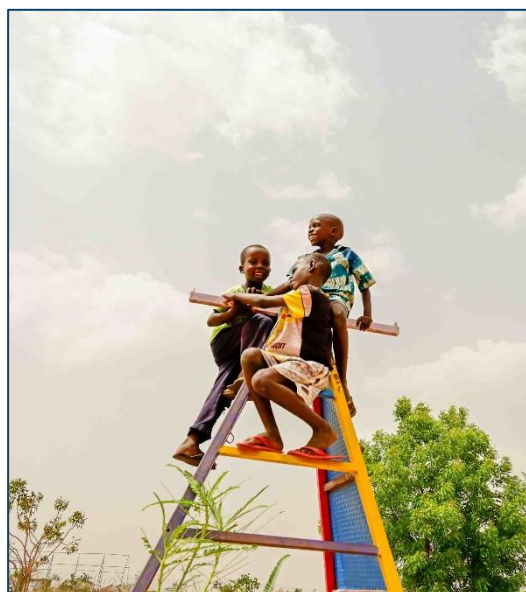
FOCUS ON IMPACT

CASE STUDY 1: EXPLORING REFUGEE KNOWLEDGE AND COMPLIANCE TO COVID–19 GUIDELINES IN UGANDA

The project emerged from existing relationships between like-minded partners motivated to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda, and plug knowledge gaps related to refugee needs identified by the Ministry of Health, a key research partner. The partners contributed to a shared engagement strategy that was well tailored to the local policy landscape. Connecting policymakers with refugee communities by organising site visits and highlighting the voices of refugees in research dissemination events, ensured the study remained focused on driving change for people affected by crisis in line with the team's joint vision.

LOOK OUTWARDS

CASE STUDY 8: EVALUATING AND IMPROVING CHILD–FRIENDLY SPACES IN EMERGENCIES

The study was embedded in a research agenda driven by humanitarian stakeholders. A research workshop was held with key agencies before the study began to define the research objectives and methodological approach, and regular and consistent updates were shared. With key study team members well positioned with the Humanitarian Alliance for Child Protection, the findings were used to directly influence the update of the Child Protection Minimum Standards by communicating and engaging with these stakeholders.

Bidibidi Child Friendly Space, Northwest Uganda. Credit: Derrick Kyatuka, World Vision

WALK THE LAST MILE

CASE STUDY 12: EVIDENCING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FACEMASKS TO PROTECT FROM VOLCANIC ASH

The study team placed an emphasis on translating results into user-friendly materials tailored for local settings, such as videos, in a wide range of languages with clear key messages. They co-developed and produced practical, capacity-building practitioner and public-focused outputs with local agencies and community representatives. A range of communications and guidance on the use of facemasks were produced for public and practitioner use, and train-the-trainer courses were delivered, working with operational partners such as the Red Cross' national society and other NGOs leading responses to volcanic eruptions.

SOCIALISE IDEAS

CASE STUDY 18: FILLING EVIDENCE GAPS FOR COMMONLY USED CHOLERA INTERVENTIONS

The study's Principal Investigator sits on various committees actively involved in shaping global cholera and WASH policy and practice. She regularly engages with the Global WASH Cluster, sectoral events, and the Clusters' broader research agenda, which directly influenced the design and focus of this study. The team used ongoing research to respond to questions posed by practitioners at both global and local level on an ongoing basis, utilising clear language that can be easily applied. Findings from this study are reflected in practitioner-focused outputs, such as Standard Operating Procedures, as well as influencing at higher policy levels.

A bucket chlorination point in Mbuji-Mayi, Democratic Republic of Congo. Credit: Gabrielle String

Dignity kits containing underwear, soap and reusable pads. Credit: Maheder Tadese/International Rescue Committee

RESPOND TO NEEDS

CASE STUDY 2: DEVELOPING AN EVIDENCE–BASED MENSTRUAL HYGIENE TOOLKIT FOR HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCIES

Initial demand for the evidence and outputs came from the humanitarian research lead. Study design, research questions and methods were therefore shaped by policy priorities and operational realities, with a goal to produce operational tools and guidance. Outputs were informed by the specific needs of programme and policy staff, as well as the inputs of key stakeholders in the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector who were engaged throughout to develop, inform, and endorse the final toolkit. Mixed methods provided rich evidence to inform this dialogue.

When applying the Framework, consider the following:

1. **Conditions in the Framework are necessary but not sufficient for delivering impact**. For example, quality and ethical research practices, and robust operational planning and risk management must be a core priority for research teams undertaking work in humanitarian settings. This said, even when research studies do not fully achieve their research objectives, teams which have a strong capacity for impact are more able to share lessons learned for the benefit of research policy and practice stakeholders.

2. **The Framework is not a checklist**. These are factors that tend to be correlated to more impact, so having all or most of them in place would be a good predictor of impact. But researchers do not need to 'complete the full set' to deliver impact. What is important is understanding the impact 'capacity' and potential of your research, and tailoring your stakeholder engagement strategy accordingly, considering humanitarian needs and research priorities.

FURTHER PRIORITIES AND OUTSTANDING QUESTIONS

Recognising this Framework can be improved, we want to continue conversations with stakeholders to further develop it. Below, we share questions that emerged during its development. We plan to develop tools based on improvements to the Framework, that can be useful for researchers, funders and other stakeholders, that will lead to greater impact.

QUESTIONS

Missing enablers? Several questions could be further explored. For example:

- Are some humanitarian sectors or contexts particularly conducive or difficult for impact?
- Does the gender or discipline of researchers play a role?
- How much does the institutional or organisational setting constrain or enable researchers?

It is likely that all the above are contributing factors to impact to some degree and could be considered in the Framework. The specific role of funders in facilitating and enabling impact should also be considered.

Missing strategies? The Framework primarily speaks to engagement of policymakers and practitioners in formal roles, such as within governments or humanitarian non-governmental organisations. A key priority for us is to better understand the role of communities and community stakeholders in research uptake – only a few impact case studies document research which directly engaged communities as a strategy, so information was too limited to allow for consistent

analysis or to draw conclusions. As a next step we also aim to explore how strategies may differ for different 'types' of research. For example, some strategies may be better suited to intervention research than to policy research.

Understanding failure: Finally, a focus on evaluating factors that lead to research impact 'failure' would be useful: that is, research teams who start out with several enablers in place, produce publishable quality research, and answer their research questions, but who still do not achieve influence or uptake in humanitarian policy and practice as they hoped. Better understanding of why this happens could identify missing strategies and enablers and would support assessment of relative importance of the various elements.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Explore the case studies
- View the Research Impact Framework
- Learn more about our R2HC programme

For more information on the Framework and the impact case studies, please contact r2hc@elrha.org.

ABOUT ELRHA

We are Elrha. A global organisation 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.

Through our globally recognised programmes, 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.

ABOUT R2HC

Elrha's Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC) programme has supported over 100 humanitarian health research studies since 2013.

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.

Ten years on, we have launched a collection of impact case studies that showcase the successes and learnings of a selection of very different studies from the R2HC portfolio.

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ENDNOTES

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