

NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH

Working Paper No. 56

Evaluation of humanitarian assistance in emergency situations

Georg Frerks and Dorothea Hilhorst

Disaster Studies
Rural Development, Sociology Group
Wageningen University
The Netherlands

E-mail: disaster.studies@alg.asnw.wau.nl

February 2002

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ISSN 1020-7473

Introduction¹

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of humanitarian assistance have recently become a topic of academic, practical and political concern. Various factors have led to this increased interest, including a level of disenchantment with results, the lack of organisational and institutional learning, little documented improvement of operations over the years, the ever increasing complexity of emergency situations and their problematic impact on results. Other concerns related to an overall lack of accountability to donors, the public at large and the beneficiaries. Over the last years there has been a number of valuable attempts to discuss these issues and to identify best practices to deal with the subject. This paper reviews current debates and trends and identifies the different approaches that may be deployed to address prevailing shortcomings in humanitarian evaluation.

In the first section of this paper we reiterate the need for monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian assistance and try to give an overview of the problems involved. We also identify the different developments and highlights in this area and formulate the questions and issues that require further attention. The second section deals with current practices and approaches to the monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian assistance. Starting with an analysis of the characteristics and limitations of the still dominant rational-scientific model of evaluation, five different perspectives are identified. By using metaphors their features and underlying premises are discussed. The third section addresses three selected problem areas to be tackled in evaluations of humanitarian assistance: evaluation of humanitarian policy, bringing in beneficiaries' perspectives, and the use and follow-up of findings. In the discussion it will be explored what contributions the earlier mentioned perspectives could make to improve current practices. The paper ends with a discussion on the need and feasibility of combining different methods in evaluation.

Monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian aid: points of departure

The rationale for conducting monitoring and evaluation exercises in the field of humanitarian aid resembles that of evaluating development aid, but comprises a number of additional arguments specific to humanitarian crises. Monitoring and evaluation are generally said to have the following functions:

First of all, there is the management function. It is important to factually observe what is happening during implementation, because the lack of information during the planning stage and resulting tenuous ex-ante assumptions cause uncertainties that require close scrutiny during execution. This is compounded by the time lag that sometimes occurs between formulation and implementation. Other factors include unexpected events once the project is underway and changing perceptions of stakeholders. This makes implementation problematic and necessitates regular management feedback to remedy any emerging problems.

¹ This paper was originally prepared for the International Workshop on "Evaluation of Humanitarian Assistance in Emergency Situations", organised by Disaster Studies, Wageningen University, in July 1999. Proceedings of this workshop can be obtained through E-mail: disaster.studies@alg.asnw.wau.nl

Second, there is the accountability or control function. Transparency to the general public, parliaments, taxpayers, beneficiaries and auditors-general is deemed relevant nowadays. It helps to improve the legitimacy of the aid and to justify the resources used. A third important function is that of learning. It is necessary to recognise weak and strong points in programmes and to identify lessons learned and best practices. These need to be incorporated in new planning cycles to attain improved future performance. Communication and negotiation are the next function. When these are properly carried out, they may facilitate a more adequate implementation of ongoing or future plans. Evaluation may also be used for the purpose of advocacy. Sometimes, a special policy function is distinguished where evaluation exercises get focused on particular policy problems and uses (Chelimsky, 1995:4). Occasionally, one particular function is stressed in evaluation studies, but more often they comprise several or all of these functions.

Several additional functions are attached to the monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian crises and humanitarian aid. The most evident rests in the fact that humanitarian programmes are “intended to save lives and reduce suffering and their effectiveness is therefore crucial to the affected population” (Borton, 1995:1). Most emergency situations are characterised by chaos, instability and fluidity, warranting constant monitoring and regular evaluation. Humanitarian aid has become increasingly dangerous and is affected by internal warfare. This calls for rigorous attempts to identify lessons learned and best practices in order to provide protection to victims and aid workers.

The importance of the overall context in determining the success or failure of interventions in humanitarian crises demands a broad evaluative scope beyond the immediate and narrow parameters of the aid project. It is now also acknowledged that relief aid can have damaging side effects on the recipient population and the local economy. It may also be liable to corruption or ‘diversion’ by conflict parties. Monitoring and evaluation can help to prevent or mitigate these problems. Another consideration relates to the sharp upward trend in humanitarian aid budgets and the call for accountability and transparency. Whereas in the past reference to good intentions was perhaps sufficient to legitimise operations, now there is need for documented proof of success. Finally, humanitarian operations suffer from a high staff turnover. In such conditions, institutional learning and systematic dissemination of results are highly needed.

Despite the fact that there is a degree of consensus regarding the functions and desirability of monitoring and evaluating humanitarian assistance, it has proven difficult to realise it in practice. This reflects the experiences in development aid, where the potentials of evaluation are only partially realised and sometimes not at all. Evaluation faces a whole cluster of problems varying from fundamental and methodological issues to funding and political commitment. Despite the rhetoric about participation there remains a problem regarding the involvement of the aid recipients, while dissemination, feedback and utilisation of results is problematic as well. This has made the quality and output of evaluations of development aid varying and their impact rather unimpressive. In fact, the monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian aid face further problems that are spelled out below.

Problems: context and substance

The context of humanitarian crises is generally not seen as conducive to evaluation. The saving of lives and alleviation of suffering is of paramount importance and should, according to many aid workers involved, take precedence over secondary activities, including monitoring and evaluation. More practical considerations relate to the chaotic situation in the field. People are displaced or at drift, lines of communication are destroyed and contacts made impossible. Other factors include a collapse of state functions, difficulty in differentiating between combatants and civilians, violence directed towards civilians and civil structures, development of war economies and the presence of a multiplicity of actors (Hallam 1997:21). In addition, these emergencies often imply security and protection issues that need to be taken into account. All these factors together impede the proper collection of data and renders comparison of data sets over time practically useless. Also within agencies and projects often no proper data are available. Humanitarian aid has to be delivered under an enormous time pressure. Besides a quick first needs-assessment, usually no baseline data are available. Many relief agencies lack an information strategy or monitoring system and even basic information is often unavailable (Borton, 1995:7).

Regarding substance there are a number of arguments that seem to complicate the monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian aid even further. The preparation of relief operations has to be very quick and documentation and analysis remain limited, if not minimal. The aid intervention itself is also temporary, lasting sometimes only a few weeks or months. Even so, objectives are changing frequently and plans of operations need constantly to be adjusted due to the uncertain conditions in the field. This makes evaluation against a set of fixed objectives and a rigorous plan of implementation difficult, if not impossible. Evaluations referring to ideal standards or practices may have a highly theoretical if not unrealistic tinge. Some observers claim that there are actually no clear and agreed indicators and standards for the judgement of relief operations. It is, furthermore, sometimes stated that emergencies are so unique and dissimilar that the comparability of data is limited and that it is hardly useful to transfer insights from one situation to the other. In addition to all these problems, the establishment of causalities is very complicated due to the multitude of operations going on simultaneously in emergency situations and the impact of the overall context. This means that conventional project evaluation techniques are less appropriate for the evaluation of humanitarian assistance. The DAC/OECD remarks in this connection that:

In the past evaluations of humanitarian assistance tended to focus on projects and utilise conventional project evaluation techniques. However, thinking has shifted and it is now believed that humanitarian assistance evaluation requires a greater emphasis upon policy evaluation techniques ... The fluidity of the context and the complexity and inter-relatedness of the response systems reduces (though by no means eliminates) the value and effectiveness of project evaluation techniques which require the separation of cause and effect. Explanation based on the separation of cause from effect is often not possible in complex systems composed of numerous interdependent relationships where the direction of influence may well be circular rather than linear. (1999:11)

In many emergencies, standard behavioural patterns are under pressure due to the disintegration of the social system. Traditional explanations and a normal logic of intervention are of limited use. Special attention should be paid here to coping mechanisms of the population under extreme circumstances. Interventions need ideally to be attuned to local coping capacities. Till now, however, local coping behaviour is not very well documented and there is yet little operational experience on how to incorporate this into relief and rehabilitation programs.

From an institutional perspective, the call for evaluation of humanitarian aid is young. There is little accumulated experience and institutional exchange is only starting recently, facing the usual institutional impediments and political sensitivities. The political nature of emergency aid, the role of media, fund raising and image building are difficult to match with the idea of an open and public 'impartial' and documented evaluation. A further institutional issue is that monitoring and evaluation are often not taken into account during the formulation of humanitarian aid packages. In the words of Hallam: "They are 'added-on' at the end of a programme, rather than being built into programme design" (1997:20). The involvement of local stakeholders is another difficult institutional issue. Beneficiaries of programmes often lack a proper organisation, while relief agencies are not always accustomed to work in a 'bottom-up' manner. According to Hallam:

Humanitarian agencies are often poor at consulting or involving members of the affected population and beneficiaries of their assistance. Consequently there can often be considerable discrepancy between the agency's perception of its performance and the perceptions of the affected population and beneficiaries. (1998:13)

The problems compounding monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian aid are partly due to the context of the emergency at stake and partly due to substantive and methodological problems affecting 'normal' evaluation. However, the very political and institutional characteristics and interests at play in the humanitarian sector itself aggravate these problems considerably and cause a number of additional ones.

Recent developments

In view of the above, it is no surprise that the nature and quality of humanitarian evaluations vary widely. There is as yet not a comprehensive set of meta-evaluations to completely judge all aspects of this variety, but a number of developments can be highlighted on the basis of the literature and an analysis of past and ongoing trends.

In the first place, more evaluation studies are being done now than in the past. The fundamental idea that humanitarian aid should be monitored and evaluated has gained general acceptance. This does not yet imply that all agencies involved have developed systematic policies and approaches to the subject or that monitoring and evaluation have become a routine aspect of their operations. Nevertheless, agencies increasingly start to consider the issue from a more systematic and professional point of view. Several donors and multilateral organisations have set up M&E departments or cells and have appointed staff to deal with the matter. Simultaneously, there has been a

process to produce internal guidelines and manuals. A similar tendency can be observed at the larger international and national NGOs.

At an inter-agency level, several initiatives have been taken to develop standards, practical guidelines and best practices and to draw lessons learned. The 'Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda' (1996) certainly has functioned as a stimulus, leading again to the DAC/OECD project 'Identifying and Disseminating Best Practice in the Evaluation of Humanitarian Assistance Programmes' and various studies and publications by the ODI. Several networks, working groups, symposia and workshops have been devoted to the subject, examples being the ALNAP-network and the MSF-H organised symposium on 'Evaluations and Impact Studies of Humanitarian Relief Interventions' (MSF, 1996).

Evaluation is further facilitated by the introduction of standards for good practice. The Code of Conduct of the ICRC has already more than 100 signatories. Another initiative is the Sphere project, which is a joint effort of a number of international NGOs, UN agencies and donors. It started in 1997 with the objective to develop a Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards. The project has resulted in elaborated standards regarding water supply and sanitation, nutrition, food aid, shelter and site planning, and health services (Sphere, 1998).

With regard to evaluation in a broader sense there has been a continuous debate on professional challenges and improvements needed, which is evidently relevant to humanitarian evaluation as well. Examples of relevant initiatives include work of the DAC/OECD Expert Group on Aid Evaluation and the American Evaluation Association. The DAC/OECD has established principles for the evaluation of development assistance as part of the DAC Principles for Effective Aid (1992).

We may thus conclude that the quality of evaluation is a growing concern of organisations and practitioners, leading to extensive attention and innovative action. Before considering how these different initiatives complement each other, the question is what different approaches can be identified and on what grounds.

Orthodox and other approaches to evaluation

This section reviews different approaches to evaluation. To characterise these approaches, they will be schematically linked to metaphors describing evaluation as part of humanitarian practice. These are the metaphors or images respectively of an arena, a knowledge-interface, a set of every-day practices, a learning process, and, finally, a platform. First, however, we shall deal with evaluation according to the rational approach, which can be characterised by the image of the project cycle. This approach used to dominate evaluation thinking in the past, and to a certain extent continues to dominate today's practice, despite the critique it has encountered. This approach was based on a scientific, positivistic and quantitatively oriented model with an exclusive role of the evaluator as the expert having specialist knowledge, and a view on policy formulation as a rational process.

The orthodox approach: the rational project cycle

In the 'traditional' or positivistic approach to evaluation, programmes and evaluations appear as rational processes. They are clearly demarcated in time and space and outputs are neatly delineated from outside influences and inputs. Evaluation is seen as one of the constituent parts of the policy or project cycle. The evaluation consists of the collection of data in prescribed ways and according to defined parameters in order to measure the achievements in areas of pre-defined objectives. It is assumed that evaluations yield information or provide lessons learned that flow back in this policy cycle and are thus incorporated in the planning of future programmes and projects. In this way, there is a constant learning process leading to an ever-improving performance. This is what Marsden and Oakley (1991) have called the instrumental/technocratic approach. It coincides basically with the prevailing orthodoxies in the donor community. It, in fact, entails an administrative-bureaucratic model depicting a decision-making process according to scientific lines.

The rational model has been criticised on three major grounds: it adheres to a positivist paradigm; it is restricted and decontextualised; and it shows a tendency to managerialism, disempowering non-privileged actors.

Firstly, the model assumes that there exists a way of knowing the 'reality' of projects, and that these projects are organised in a rational way. However, it should be recognised that projects are socially shaped and interpreted, depending on the individual actors' positions, perceptions and interests. There are thus always multiple realities. Besides, it has been shown that other considerations than only 'rational' ones enter into the decision-making process. Authors point to the exigencies of the political environment which determine the use, non-use or abuse of evaluation findings (see Weiss, 1988; Lekanne, 1995; and Chelimsky, 1995). The seminal work of Carol Weiss already indicated the political determinants of evaluations (1975). For humanitarian aid, the political nature of projects and evaluations has been amply demonstrated. We see even a lot of documented evidence of abuse and diversion of humanitarian aid which eventually functions to prolong or sustain an emergency, and is manipulated to serve the interests of the protagonists of conflict, warlords and profiteers (see Keen, 1994 and de Waal, 1997). Now, it is often considered that evaluating is a political act and the evaluation itself is seen as a social construction. Guba and Lincoln assert:

We do not treat evaluation primarily as a technical process of inquiry ... Perhaps most startling, we don't treat evaluation as a scientific process, because it is our conviction that to approach evaluation scientifically is to miss completely its fundamental social, political, and value-oriented character (1989:7-8).

Interpretative, constructivist and actor-oriented approaches could help to make the diverse social interests of the different actors visible and comprehensible and unravel the political nature of both the humanitarian intervention and the evaluation.

Secondly, the orthodox model is based on a notion of linear causality that directly relates cause and effect. As was elaborated above, this type of causality does not hold,

which is especially clear in the case of complex humanitarian emergencies. Humanitarian crises have long been considered on the basis of a paradigm holding that a gradual process of progress is the normal pattern, while disasters and emergencies are an irritating, but temporary disruption of that process. It is now accepted that it is very doubtful whether this model still has much empirical and analytical validity in the present situation of nearly permanent crisis and conflict in many parts of the world. The old modernist thinking, in terms of stability and gradual progressive change, needs to be replaced by a model that incorporates the current context of instability, conflict and chaos. In the orthodox approach, project evaluation was delineated from its environment. It was an 'enclave' that had been subject to 'context-stripping', as aptly coined by Guba and Lincoln (1989:36).

Thirdly, classical evaluations show a tendency to managerialism as it is managers or leaders that normally commission evaluation studies. Guba and Lincoln argue that the relationship between managers and evaluators often becomes 'cozy' and is seldom challenged. The effect is that the manager is often 'saved' and the finger of blame pointed elsewhere. These authors characterise the resulting evaluations as disempowering, unfair and disenfranchising towards the other actors involved. Participatory approaches to evaluation could serve to avoid one-sided, supply-driven evaluations and guarantee the incorporation of local knowledge, perceptions and opinions. Prudence is needed, however, to avoid that these participatory initiatives are captured by elite interests and only function to reproduce local power relationships.

Humanitarian evaluation needs to be approached in a broad-based manner paying attention to the overall context and the policy and institutional environment. As remarked earlier, the outcomes of humanitarian assistance depend very much on wider developments in relation to the ongoing conflict, but also on the possibilities of a concerted and co-ordinated relief response in the field.

There have been two basic responses to the critique on the orthodox evaluation i.e. expanding its domain and incorporating alternative methodologies. The normal, traditional evaluative criteria of 'relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability' are considered problematic and too restricted in the context of humanitarian emergencies. Following from the critique on the orthodox model, policies are in themselves topics for analysis and cannot easily be taken as unproblematic frames of reference for evaluation. Responses to rapid onset disasters are formulated often in an ad-hoc and reactive manner without even being documented and thus being available to evaluators. The lack of fixed objectives makes the assessment of effectiveness problematic, while questions of impact and sustainability are hardly deemed relevant due to the limited scope of the objectives and the short time span and temporary character of the interventions. The issue of efficiency is seen as sensitive and even inappropriate due to the reluctance to express lives saved in monetary terms and to apply cost/benefit analyses to life-saving operations.

Besides, it is also felt that these traditional criteria are not focused enough on the overall context of the humanitarian operation. There is a tendency now to complement them with additional criteria such as: timeliness, appropriateness, connectedness, coverage, coherence and co-ordination (DAC/OECD, 1999:21-22). These additional criteria would enable a better focus on the overall context and the longer term, and

respond to the need to better co-ordinate the multi-actor relief and rehabilitation operations. They also would take into account the differential impact of aid on the different groups, regions etc. as well as be sensitive to the influence of other interventions e.g. in the military, diplomatic and economic domain.

Although the broadening of criteria may lead to a more comprehensive evaluation practice, it also leads to new problems. It complicates the evaluation exercise considerably, may lead to heavy instruments, and leaves one with the question of how to weigh the different criteria.

The second response is to incorporate different methodologies, in particular from qualitative approaches. Next we will give 5 alternative portraits of evaluation. These can be schematically linked to different approaches. This means that without trying to do justice to the nuances of each approach or possible overlaps between them, broad-stroked approaches can be identified. This will be done without threading into the details of available methods and techniques to work with them in practice.

Alternative images of evaluation

Evaluation processes could, in the first place, also be viewed as arenas where different interests are contested. This image particularly counterbalances the lack of acknowledgement of the political nature in orthodox evaluation as was stipulated above. According to this image the multiple actors directly or indirectly involved in humanitarian programmes all have own interests that they try to achieve. Although all kind of evaluation approaches take into account that actors may have interests that compete with the objectives of particular project interventions, this notion is basic to those evaluations associated with political economy approaches.

A second image can be portrayed of evaluation as encounters at interfaces of knowledge and power. From this point of view, the emphasis is on the differential interpretations and meanings that actors accord to themselves, each other, the emergency situation and the humanitarian programme. This angle can be associated with forms of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is concerned with unravelling the overt and underlying assumptions and values of humanitarian policy and practice. The interest in discourse stems from the intimate connection between knowledge and power as was exemplified by Foucault:

Power produces knowledge...power and knowledge directly imply one another... there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations (1995).

Discourse analysis usually encompasses more than the analysis of language statements. It may incorporate speech, symbolic gestures, and other kinds of practices. A major premise in the analysis of discourse is that the use of actors of a particular discourse in specific situations leads to emergent properties whose impacts may vastly surpass the agency of individuals or particular groups (see Ferguson, 1990).

Thirdly, evaluation may be viewed as processes that are shaped by actors' everyday practices. This image also incorporates ideas about interests, knowledge and power, but focuses on how these get contested and negotiated in the everyday practice of evaluation. This image is associated with actor-oriented approaches. Such an approach starts with the premise that there are always multiple and contested 'realities'. Actors, confronted with particular phenomena or events, don't respond mechanically according to their interests, but accord meaning to and interpret what happens, thus shaping their responses. Development interventions and livelihoods (and humanitarian emergencies one might add), according to Long (1997:2), "are materialised and socially constructed through the interplay, contestation and negotiation of values and interests within specific domains and arenas of social action". In this approach, interventions and evaluation appear as complicated sets of processes "which involve the reinterpretation or transformation of policy during the implementation process, such that there is in fact no straight line from policy to outcomes" (Long and van der Ploeg, 1989:229).

Closely related to the above, there is the metaphor of evaluation as a learning process, which applies to what is called process approaches. A process approach to monitoring and evaluation provides, according to David Mosse and companions, an alternative to rational project thinking in three ways. It has a focus on programmes as learning processes, it emphasises relations and contextual elements and it recognises the dynamic, unpredictable and idiosyncratic elements in programmes (Mosse et al, 1998:5). A process approach may comprise methods of varying intensity, ranging from ethnographic project documentation to in-house workshops. It is distinguished from 'traditional' evaluation in three aspects (ibid: 10). It concerns continuous data gathering instead of ex post research, it focuses on the present, and it is action-oriented. The latter not only means that one adjusts programmes according to the findings during process monitoring, but it is a methodological premise that trying to change reality reveals many insights about this reality that otherwise remain hidden (Uphoff, 1992 in Mosse, 1998:10). In the humanitarian field, this approach may be closely associated with the work of ALNAP.

Finally, evaluation may be viewed as a platform for the negotiation of different interpretations and interests. This view gets most closely associated with participatory and stakeholder approaches. Here, humanitarian programmes are seen as a field of multiple stakeholders. Stakeholders are all those interested groups, parties, actors, claimants and institutions that exert a hold over a humanitarian organisation or programme. They affect or are affected by the programme (cf. Fowler, 1997:174). This includes beneficiaries, donors and others directly involved, but also bodies affecting the environment of the operations, and even adversaries. A participatory evaluation provides a platform to all relevant stakeholders to define the objectives, process, outcome and impact of a programme (see Arevalo et al, 1998; Fowler, 1997; Marsden, Oakley and Pratt, 1990; Zadek and Gatward, 1996). The evaluator acts as a mediator in a process where the evaluation outcomes are negotiated among the stakeholders rather than 'scientifically' established by the evaluator-expert (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).


In practice, these approaches are partly overlapping. Nonetheless they are constituted in different philosophical, ideological and value frameworks, and not just on the methods employed (see also Greene, 1994:530-44). In particular, the different

approaches can be positioned on a scale that ranges from structuralistic to voluntaristic (see Figure 1). On the one side we find political economy and discourse analyses where actors are caught, so to speak, in structural processes beyond their reach or into discursive constructions, respectively. At the other end of the spectrum we find participatory and stakeholder approaches. These are the most voluntaristic. Stakeholders are supposed to have different ideas and interests, which can be expressed, discussed and negotiated in order to reach a common understanding and to define common interpretations and objectives.

The constructivist approaches are found somewhere in the middle. Here actors are considered to shape the situation, among others by responding according to structural processes. However, their actions cannot be seen as voluntaristic, since they operate within the boundaries implicit in their life-worlds, social networks, and larger interpretative frames. The outcomes of their combined actions constitute emergent properties that have only partly been explicitly negotiated or imagined before hand.

These differences make combining the different methods discussed a complicated affair. We will come back to that in the concluding section of this paper. First we shall discuss three pertinent issues of humanitarian evaluation in order to illustrate the differences implied.

Fig. 1: Images and approaches to evaluation

IMAGE	APPROACHES	
Arena	Political economy approaches	 structuralist constructivist voluntaristic
Knowledge interface	Discourse analyses	
Set of everyday practices	Actor-oriented approaches	
Learning process	Process approaches	
Platform	Participatory approaches Stakeholder approaches	

Issues of evaluation

Having outlined different approaches to evaluation, based on varying paradigms and worldviews, this section discusses what they matter for three relevant issues of evaluation: the evaluation of policy; the importance of beneficiary responses and perspectives; and the follow-up of the outcomes of evaluation.

Evaluation of policy

A first field of interest is the evaluation of humanitarian aid policy. According to the orthodox, rational approach policy is assumed to be a set of coherent intentions to frame action, which get formulated and completed before action takes off. Policy, in this view, is sealed off from implementation. It is a 'given' formulated by the appropriate authorities or parties and stays outside of the realm of evaluation. However, as has become a common understanding lately, policy cannot be neatly distinguished from implementation and other aspects of relief. Policy is practice, it is a process rather than an outcome (Clay and Schaffer, 1984). It may be viewed as a "point of relative firmness built into a continuing flow" (Colebatch, 1998:9).

Humanitarian policy has increasingly become included in the domain of evaluation studies. This could include policy at the level of humanitarian principles that provide the legitimacy to humanitarian assistance. Often referred to, one tends to forget that these are not fixated in time-honoured texts. They are given meaning over time, explicitly through discussions, conferences and policy statements and implicitly in bodies of practices of relief agencies (Minear and Weiss, 1993). Moreover, humanitarian principles are not uncontested. They are being challenged by other sets of principles that some agencies equally want to adhere to (Slim, 1997). In practice, little explicit evaluation has been done on the appropriateness of the humanitarian principles, and evaluation mainly has been focused on policy at a more operational level. The questions asked and the methods used vary according to the different approaches we have identified.

Policy studies from a political economy perspective deal with interests, hidden agendas, the linkages with larger geo-politics and the relation between humanitarian policy and other policies for intervention or non-intervention for example in military or diplomatic domains. Numerous works could be cited here, varying from the accusatory, comprehensive (and rather journalistic) account of Maren's "Road to Hell" (1997), to specific analyses of impacts of the end of the Cold War (e.g. Mazrui, 1996), or the influence of religious institutions on humanitarian organisations (e.g. Zucker, 1989). Some studies focus on international and local relations of policy and practice for specific cases (such as Brabant, 1994). Other examples are studies that track the influence of the media on national policy making, such as the works of Benthall (1993), Rotberg and Weiss (1996), and Strobel (1997).

Discourse analysis on humanitarian policy has lagged behind the debates that recently sprung up regarding discourses of development.² A major exception is the work of

² See, for example, Apthorpe and Gasper, Arce et al, 1994; Escobar, 1995; Hobart, 1993; Preston, 1994; Sachs, 1992; Stirro and Grillat, 1997.

Duffield (1998). He analyses changes in (humanitarian) aid policy since the 1970s, and shows the assumptions regarding the cause, nature and solutions for conflict these reflect. In brief, conflict is seen as originating in underdevelopment, stemming from a combination of poverty, resource competition, and weak institutions. Violence is thought to spread on the basis of a local breakdown in communication, misunderstanding and mutual fear. He shows how the humanitarian discourse of conflict and violence maintains that conflict is like an illness that disrupts development, and needs development to be cured. The problem with these assumptions is, according to Duffield, that these policies are not empirically validated and “say little about the actual nature of the emerging political formations of the South” (1998:3).

Some critical questions should be posed here too. Duffield’s work implies there is one hegemonic discourse of humanitarian relief. However, as Apthorpe (1996:22) says, there is always a “plurality of languages”. Discourses are fragmented and continuously under negotiation (Gaspar, 1996). Likewise, Bruce Jones (no date) has argued that Mark Duffield’s arguments do not equally apply to the whole-varied range of humanitarian approaches.

A particular kind of discourse analysis looks at policy texts as narratives: explanatory stories with a scenario for action. Roe (1991:288) describes narratives as “particular stories, with a beginning a middle and an end, that revolve around a series of positions or events where something happens or from which something follows”. Roe observes the persistency of particular narratives, despite repeated invalidation. An explanation he finds in “the ambiguity decision makers experience over the development process”. The more uncertainty, the more policy makers are compelled to resort to “explanatory narratives that can be operationalised into standard approaches with widespread application” (Roe, 1991:288). This work seems particularly useful for emergency situations, where there is always a pressure to act in conditions of uncertainty. A research into the villagisation policy of Rwanda found, how policy makers accepted a blueprint policy that would not likely to be adopted in ‘normal’ situations (Hilhorst and van Leeuwen, 1999).

Another angle to evaluate humanitarian policy can be provided by process or actor-oriented approaches. This would entail the documentation of actors’ practices to unravel the contingencies of policy making as a social process. It could also shed light on the complicated relations that may exist between policy and implementation. Examples of these can be found in the field of development studies, for instance Rew (1985), and Porter, Allen and Thompson (1991). Unfortunately, we know of no examples yet in the field of humanitarian assistance.

From the point of view of participatory approaches, it is especially important to ask who is involved in policy making. As indicated in the second section, classical evaluations showed a tendency to managerialism. The concern is therefore that evaluators must ask themselves and negotiate whose questions will be addressed and whose interests will be served by their work. In particular, they should guarantee that voices of the affected population in emergencies are heard by policy makers, either directly or through intermediaries, such as researchers or local NGOs (see for instance Holland and Blackburn, 1998). This brings us to the next issue of bringing in local perspectives.

Bringing in local perspectives

Bringing in perspectives of local actors, the very people whose suffering humanitarian programmes are meant to alleviate, should be a major concern of humanitarian evaluation. In the orthodox approach, beneficiaries are important to measure the impact of the humanitarian programme. Given the importance of the context in which humanitarian operations take place, the interest of evaluation has to be considerably broadened. A first issue concerns power, interests and social change. Secondly, discursive labelling and perspectives are considered crucial to understand the dynamics of humanitarian assistance. A third topic relates to coping and livelihood. Although not exclusively, these issues correspond with the main emphasis of political economy, discourse analyses and actor-oriented approaches respectively. One problematic with bringing in local perspectives refers to the long time-span research into these issues normally requires. Participatory approaches aim to remedy this problem, but, as we shall see, may be problematic in themselves. Perhaps, as recently is being argued, a mix of multiple methods may be deployed to effectively address these issues.

Power, interests, and social change

With the images of humanitarian suffering in mind, one tends to consider local people in the first place as victims of disaster. However, local actors have different resources to cope with emergencies, and may have an active role in shaping the devastation of an emergency. Each emergency seems to know victims but also people who manage to profit from the situation, or define their interests in exacerbating conflict. Understanding the impact of humanitarian assistance thus requires looking into the dynamics, and perhaps even the logic, of emergencies and responses to these emergencies. In particular the works of Duffield (1993) and Keen (1994) elaborate the issue of actors' interests and the patterning of situations of crisis and apparent breakdown.

In addition, one should ask how disaster situations relate to social change and long-term relations between different social groups. Several studies have focused on the question how the local socio-political and economic fabric of society changes in the light of emergency. Greg Bankoff (1998), for example, provides us with an analysis of how responses to natural disaster in the Philippines tend to magnify socio-economic gaps. The ethnography of Vernooy (1992) follows actors who have to deal with the devastation of a hurricane in war-torn Nicaragua. He focused on how the day-to-day efforts of people to start over again both informed and were informed by ongoing particular political struggles and cultural values.

Labelling and local narratives

One perspective to bring out the beneficiaries' point of view is by deconstructing the labelling processes that typify the relation between the local population and humanitarian agencies. Labelling, as Wood (1985) pointed out, is one of the discursive policy practices by which control, regulation and management are achieved. A classic example of labelling in the field of humanitarian emergencies is

the portrayal of affected people as victims that develop a dependency syndrome towards relief agencies (see Harrell-Bond, 1986). Although the aid system is held responsible for the fostering of such an attitude, in effect, the victims tend to be blamed for their situation.

The idea of a dependency syndrome among refugees has been disputed by research into the strategies and initiatives taken by refugees in camps. Kibreab (1993) found no dependency mentality among Somali refugees. In contrast, they undertook a range of economic activities, sometimes even at the risk of losing their access to food distribution. Allen and others (1996) also refuted this view of refugees as “passive recipients of aid”. One reason why reports about an alleged dependency syndrome persistently recur may be that, in certain cases, local actors have become very skilful in “playing the victim”. This could especially be the case for those actors with a history of ‘refugeeness’, i.e. people that have experience in different camps because they were confronted with a range of emergencies.

Labelling practices can have grave consequences for those being labelled. Bradbury (1998) stipulated how the ‘myth’ of dependency in the case of Sudan led to measures reducing aid packages of refugees, which forced refugees to adopt “dysfunctional” coping mechanisms, such as mothers deliberately starving their babies in order to get access to food rations.

Labelling is not a one-way process. Albeit perhaps with different consequences, local actors also label relief workers and relief agencies. An evaluation study into the Dutch humanitarian aid to Somalia showed, how local Somali people and aid workers labelled each others’ characteristics and styles of work, which had far reaching effects on the implementation of the programme (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1994:98). For instance, while the relief workers thought of their own organisation as structured, and the Somali communities as anarchic, the Somali considered themselves to be negotiating, while they thought the relief workers were coercive. As a result, “[t]he lack of a common understanding between the Somalis and the international community produced a mutually unintelligible dialogue” (ibid:99). Johan Pottier argued as well that the perception of local actors on relief agencies influences programmes. He showed that refugees’ perception of UNHCR as being partisan to the conflict greatly influenced their decisions to go home or to stay in the camp (1996).

Actors’ responses to disaster and livelihood

Evaluation should be concerned with the question how humanitarian aid fits into and complements people’s coping and livelihood practices. No more than an estimated 10% of survival in emergencies can be contributed to relief aid (Waal, 1995 and Africa Watch, 1991; quoted in Duffield, 1993:144). Local people find their own ways to cope with emergency, maximising their own capacities, resources and social networks. The importance of studies on how local people cope and reconstitute their livelihood in situations of humanitarian disaster is obvious. Aid should be adjusted to local capacities and practice in order to be effective, instead of being ineffective or even counter effective.

One brand of studies followed actors' practices in emergency situations. Some may be read as taxonomies of local knowledge and coping mechanisms (Toulmin, 1995, Blaikie, 1994:64-9; Curtis, 1993:4-7). They list and describe coping mechanisms to disaster as observed among local people. These studies are highly insightful to obtain ideas on coping, provided they are put in the perspective of local social realities. Sometimes, one encounters the tendency to view these coping mechanisms as pieces of knowledge and practice without considering the scale on which these get practised or the way knowledge gets constructed in social processes, including the role of social networks and power relations (Long and Villarreal, 1993). Studies into coping practises should embed local knowledge in its social and political context (cf. Fairhead, 1993), and take into account the way practices get shaped at interfaces with other kinds of knowledge, such as scientific or bureaucratic knowledge (Arce and Long, 1992).

Other studies focus on the heterogeneity of local actors in constituting their livelihoods in situations of conflict and disaster. Oliver Bakewell studied livelihoods of Angolan refugees in Zambia (Bakewell, 2000). By following the actors, he places important question marks to administrative categories such as 'migrants', 'refugees', and 'cross border movements'.

Participatory approaches

Participatory approaches are designed to incorporate perspectives of local people in studies plans or activities, in a relatively short time frame. They evolved in the 1980s. Although there are many different participatory approaches, the best known has become the Participatory Rural Appraisal. This approach has become increasingly criticised, among others for some of its underlying assumptions. A first implicit concept in PRA relates to knowledge as a local body or system, that is stored in people's heads and can be extracted from a community once people are being respectfully asked about their opinions. As was elaborated above, this does not take into account the way knowledge gets constructed. It assumes that through participatory research practical knowledge can become discursive (in terms of Giddens, 1984), without realising that these processes of translation accord meaning in hindsight and are formulated to adjust to the audience, i.e. the participatory researcher. Although the researcher may perceive of him or herself as a facilitator, local actors may adjust to this audience they rely on for future support. In a similar vein, the rapid execution of participatory research reinforces "the myth about intervention processes as neatly bound in time and space" (Pottier, 1993: 30).

Secondly, the notion of community in participatory approaches has to be revisited. Despite acknowledging local differentiation and differential power and resources, it is assumed that a dialogue between local groups is feasible and will eventually lead to one community point of view. This erroneous idea often leads to the marginalisation in the research process of particular groups, for instance women (Mosse, 1994). It is also indifferent to the political culture in which the participatory research takes place (Pottier, 1997). The process may also lead to the suppression of tension and contradictions, especially in areas of ongoing conflict.

Finally, there is a problem in the definition of power and empowerment. The idea to empower local actors displays inadvertently a belief in change as managed by outsiders, who come to the community to bring 'empowerment' (Long and Villarreal 1993:160). The question is, moreover, who gets empowered and whether participatory approaches may instead not substantiate ongoing power processes. Frerks (1991:190) remarked about participation in local level development in a Sri Lankan village that:

Participation is patterned along structural lines that confine its acclaimed benefits like equal access and equitable benefit distribution in such a way that existing relationships are reproduced rather than changed. Participatory development activities are manipulated and directed towards desired outcomes on the basis of resource control. The most powerful -whatever their power base- succeed in acquiring most benefits.

These critical notions may be even more relevant in cases of emergency situations where the impact of power processes often get magnified, hostilities may erupt and concepts of community get locally redefined with the disruption of social networks and movements of people.

The critical notions regarding participatory research have, among others, led to the development of new and better participatory methodologies aiming to circumvent these problems. In addition, one finds many authors that advocate to combine elements of participatory research with other approaches. Johan Pottier (1993) suggested substantiating participatory approaches with reflexive project ethnography. Mosse et al. incorporates participatory streaks in what they call a process approach to development (1998). Rebien (1996) argued to strengthen participatory research by working from an actor-oriented perspective.

The use and follow-up of evaluation

A final consideration emerging from recent debates is that regarding the use, non-use and abuse of evaluation results. Regarding the utilisation of findings there seems to be an overall scepticism, as there is not much documented evidence that evaluation findings are systematically applied in practice. It is not easy to assess the impact of evaluation. Since much institutional learning happens through informal channels, the effects of evaluation partly remain invisible and may therefore be underestimated. On the other hand, by ascribing institutional change to the outcome of evaluations, rather than other 'pressures for change', one may also overestimate the effects of evaluation (Minear, 1998: 7).

In the 'rational project' tradition the use of evaluation was not given much attention, in the presumption that "the findings from evaluation were fed back into the decision making in a stable feedback loop" (Carlsson and Forss, n.d.). Although few people will adhere to this thought, it lingers on in those analyses that blame the lack of impact of evaluation on the inherent (bad) quality of evaluations, or the lack of dissemination of these findings. According to this line of thought, more effective co-ordination and control may be achieved through the availability of more information by fine-tuning evaluation instruments and reaching more perfection in data collection and analysis. Persons who propagate this approach would say that one simply has to

follow the procedural instructions and prescribed technical standards for evaluation more rigidly in order to attain sound evaluation results and a proper utilisation thereof.

Another idea is that it is the responsibility of the evaluator to take the information needs of users into account and make evaluation more 'user-friendly'. Chelimsky, for example, urges evaluators to improve the credibility of their work. In order to get policy makers to listen, she asks attention for two types of credibility: substantive (the question of what knowledge was produced and how it was acquired) and presentational credibility (the reporting of what has been done). As she says:

Credibility is worth almost any effort because it wins the evaluator a fair hearing, an interested (even greatly expanded) audience, survival to speak another day, and a much greater likelihood that the work will be used and will matter in policy making (1995:11).

Most authors, however, point to problems with the theoretical underpinnings of evaluation and its social and policy context. Lekanne (1995), for example, asserted that evaluation presupposes a rational, scientific planning model, which has never been adopted in daily development practice. In a plural, complex and disorderly society decisions on goals and programmes are political compromises that do not necessarily correspond with the outcomes of evaluation. Although many will agree to this statement, there are different ways and emphases in dealing with this.

The politics of evaluation

Some blame the gap between evaluation findings and application in particular to the political nature of organisations, policy making and evaluations. Under the title, "Is anybody there? Does anybody care?", Carol Weiss (1988) pointed to the exigencies of the political environment which determine the use, non-use or abuse of evaluation findings. In this connection, Chelimsky has observed that: "In practice the decision-making environment and the evaluative process are often so far apart that nothing can bring them together" and noted that in the case of powerful political and institutional goals evaluators may confront intense hostility and 'astonishing pressures' (1995:4-6). From an evaluation of Dutch bilateral projects (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1995), evaluation reports appeared as a type of bran-tub from which policy makers and other 'users' of evaluation choose elements, findings and recommendations in a selective manner to suit their own interests. According to this study, evaluation principles such as policy relevance, objectivity, methodological rigour or compliance to procedures or guidelines were only of secondary importance. The observation of Long and van der Ploeg seems to be pertinent here:

The rules of the game 'evaluation' are conditioned more by the social interests of those involved in manufacturing, promoting, selling and utilizing this particular commodity than by the function it is assumed to fulfil in the intervention model (1989:235).

Evaluation as a negotiated learning process

Recently, much attention has been given to aspects of organisational and institutional learning. Evaluation, in such an approach, is a learning process that comprises the negotiation of findings and recommendations among concerned stakeholders. In the field of humanitarian aid evaluation, this view is particularly associated with the ALNAP: the Active Learning Network on Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Assistance. In a discussion paper for ALNAP on organisational learning, van Brabant gives the following definition:

Organisational learning means steering the practice of an organisation on the basis of an ongoing, collective and interactive, inquisitive review, by deliberately well-informed staff, of one's own and the available institution-wide experiences and current practices, and their underlying assumptions, models and beliefs (Brabant, 1997:G).

This approach emphasises cultural properties of humanitarian organisations that inhibit or encourage learning. Minear (1998:1), for example, distinguishes four cultural impediments to learning in humanitarian organisations. These are “their tendency to approach every crisis as unique, their action-oriented nature, their defensiveness to criticism, and their lack of accountability”. Remedies to lack of learning are thus primarily found in changing the culture within humanitarian organisations.

Participatory evaluation and the issue of legitimacy

Due to their political nature, evaluations have often been seen as one-sided, donor-propelled initiatives. Their legitimacy in the eyes of other stakeholders was as a consequence limited. This was thought to account for their little learning effect and their close-to-zero influence on the ground. One might say that in the issue of legitimacy is one of the rationales for advocating participatory evaluation. Rist says:

The call for participatory evaluation comes at a time when the distrust of official data in many developing countries is so high that what governmental data systems and databases do exist, have little or no legitimacy ... The result is that participatory evaluation takes on an additional justification in that the data generated from such an approach are believed to be more trustworthy, more accurate, and less manipulated by government officials (1995:167-8).

Since participatory approaches have come to be included in the above-mentioned approaches for organisational learning, they have also become referred to as ‘shared social learning’ (Apthorpe and Atkinson (1999, draft). Promising as this may be, we need to remain cautious to take into account the unequal relations that may exist in this shared process. As one research into participatory needs assessments among Sudanese refugees showed, the shared process may be perceived locally as being imposed by powerful agencies and, in this case, an infringement of their dignity (Jok, 1996).

Current trends

The issue of the use and follow-up of evaluation has lately been high on the agenda of humanitarian agencies, and gave rise to numerous efforts to improve the impact of evaluations. A survey of the DAC Expert Group of the OECD into the feedback from aid evaluations revealed many such mechanisms initiated by donors. As the report comments (OECD, 1990:25):

The evaluation process is no longer perceived by many donors as ending with the tabling of evaluation reports. Canada, for example, claims that the tabling of reports constitutes the half-way mark for evaluation completion.

One way of improving the quality and impact of evaluation is to synthesise findings into a type of meta-analysis that enables us to draw lessons with reference to a broader empirical base. (Rist, 1995:168). Meta-evaluations in the humanitarian field are, among others, propagated and implemented by ALNAP.

Another possibility is the introduction of follow-up or compliance studies to assess the implementation of lessons in the wake of evaluation. This was done one year after the multi-agency evaluation of the international community responses to the Rwanda crisis (see Dabelstein, 1996 for a description of the process involved). Although the results of this follow-up study may both lead to optimism and pessimism regarding the possible impact of evaluation (see Minear, 1997), the mere fact that it was undertaken shows a commitment to further develop improved practices for the evaluation of humanitarian assistance.

Conclusion

Evaluation of humanitarian assistance is not easy. Emergencies involve, by their very nature, a high level of uncertainty and change, and all too often violence is a major component. Humanitarian interventions take place in high-risk, highly politicised fields with big resource flows. The question is, in these situations, what approach to take in evaluation studies.

There is now a noticeable tendency to argue for more qualitative approaches in evaluation, including participatory and actor oriented approaches, as only qualitative methods are thought to be able to capture the intricacies of humanitarian interventions and their context. This does not mean that orthodox approaches could be thrown out altogether, according to advocates of qualitative approaches. Despite the criticisms to the orthodox approach, it retains a place in alternative forms of evaluation. As Mosse et al. remarked, logical frameworks and other indicator-based monitoring systems remain necessary tools of planning and management. "Indeed, it is hard to conceive of purposeful, planned activity which is not based on hypothesised causal relations" (Mosse et al., 1998:5).

Many acknowledge that no singular method can do the job, and that methods have to be combined to reach best results. The conditions in the field, the nature of the subject and the possibilities and constraints in doing evaluation research call for a judicious combination of several, mainly qualitative approaches and research methods. In these

conditions, many will agree that “evaluators must adopt a flexible approach, and be prepared to use a number of different methods” (Apthorpe and Neville, 1998). Likewise Chelimsky (1995:7) asserts, that by using methods complementarily and critically (methodological triangulation) “the strength of one can compensate for the limitations of others”.

This paper has reviewed different approaches and discussed some of their differences in assumptions and emphasis. Although we agree that a multiple approach is often desirable and feasible, we do believe it is also necessary to remain reflective about its limitations and about the consequences this has for the assumptions, methods, outcomes and actions that follow evaluation. The different approaches are partly overlapping and complementary. This implies that to a certain extent methods based on these approaches can be combined to achieve better evaluation results. On the other hand, they are partly incongruent and based on radically different paradigmatic premises on social reality, which puts restrictions to the effectiveness of mixing them in one evaluation approach. Combining methods may also lead to a situation where different elements lose their strengths and become confusing. To avoid this, evaluators should at least be clear and explicit about the rationale underlying their choice of methodology.

We have to be aware, that the combination of approaches as has become advocated recently, has not yet been widely put in practice. Not many innovative qualitative methods have yet been applied by donor countries and agencies in humanitarian evaluation, and it is necessary to further experiment with such methods. It remains necessary to continue the discussion about appropriate ways of evaluating humanitarian aid. It is even more necessary to carry out research on this topic and to document ongoing practices including their potentials and limitations

Emergencies pose serious limitations to the execution of evaluation studies. Much information cannot be gathered under the conditions of a complex emergency. Decisions for the duration and depth of evaluation are often severely constrained by considerations of costs. In practice, evaluators may often have a maximum of two weeks to evaluate complicated programmes. Another limitation is the element of timeliness of results. Unfortunately, the increasing complexity of development problems, policies and the overall environment and the desire to engage all relevant stakeholders tend to prolong the duration of the studies, which may not be feasible in light of information needs.

Humanitarian evaluations generally have to face a lot of conceptual, methodological and organisational problems and are not easily brought to a satisfactory level of quality and performance. It is, therefore, unwise to demand a maximum performance on all accounts, as this seems to be highly unrealistic. In order to avoid deceptions, it would be advisable to make choices regarding approach, scope, method, subject and criteria. As Benini (1997) argues, solutions may not always be found in more evaluation, but in the level of uncertainty stakeholders are prepared to accept.

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