



Policy Brief

Conducting Rigorous Research in Humanitarian Contexts

This policy brief brings together learnings from the Humanitarian Education Accelerator (HEA) External Evaluation Firm, American Institutes for Research (AIR), on the challenges and potential solutions for conducting rigorous research in humanitarian and crisis settings.



Girls fill in HEA data collection survey in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya

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When properly designed and executed, randomized trials produce robust and significant findings even in the most difficult circumstances.... Mixed methods enhance explanatory power for studies that explore impact and cause-and-effect questions.

(Burde, 2012, p. 469)

In protracted crisis settings, many children and youth lack access to high-quality education: only 61% of all refugee children attend primary school, compared with 92% of all children globally; only 23% of adolescent refugees attend secondary school; and just 1% of refugees attend university (UNHCR, 2018).

Identifying and scaling effective education innovations could rapidly increase both access to and the quality of education for all. However, major evidence gaps limit our understanding of what works in crisis contexts.

Evidence from rigorous, mixed-method, experimental or quasi-experimental impact evaluations of education innovations in crisis contexts is particularly limited (Burde, Guven, Kelcey, Lahmann, & Al-Abbadi, 2015; Puri, Aladysheva, Iversen, Ghorpade, & Brück, 2015). For this reason, it is crucial to implement more rigorous studies, with credible comparison groups, to determine what works to improve education outcomes in humanitarian and crisis contexts. In addition, impact and process evaluations are vital to examine programme implementation and contribute to the successful scale-up of education programmes, in both humanitarian and development contexts.

However, the number of mixed-method impact evaluations will increase only if researchers are able to deal with challenges that are specific to conducting research in humanitarian contexts.

Research challenges identified under the HEA

Crisis settings are complex and often unstable. Security conditions and accessibility can change suddenly for a range of reasons, including adverse weather conditions, conflict, political tensions, and delays waiting for official government clearances to collect data.

We identified four main challenges when designing and implementing evaluations of education innovations in humanitarian contexts:

1 Distrusting motives of data collectors

Populations in crisis contexts often distrust motives of data collectors who are not from their community, limiting the information they share with researchers.

3 Sensitive environments

Data collection in refugee camps, settlements, or other areas densely populated with refugees can be challenging for enumerators who do not reside in those areas, as security concerns for the population and the researchers themselves may restrict access.

These challenges are more prevalent and acute than in international development settings, however they are not unique to humanitarian contexts. For example, it is also challenging to align evaluation designs with implementation and context in international development settings. Nonetheless, impact evaluation lessons from the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation's

2 Alignment of evaluation design

In both crisis and development contexts, evaluation design needs to be aligned with programme implementation and context. Achieving this alignment without losing rigour can be challenging in humanitarian and crisis settings.

4 Complex research approval processes

Due to the need to protect vulnerable populations, numerous approvals may be required to conduct research in crisis settings (from local institutional review boards, relevant government institutions, and organizations focused on refugee rights).

(3ie's) Humanitarian Assistance Thematic Window showed that adverse humanitarian contexts can compromise the fidelity of evaluation designs (3ie, 2016). Gaining trust and maintaining security for data collectors, as well as ensuring approvals to conduct research, are often even more challenging in humanitarian contexts than in international development settings.

To address the challenges, researchers designing and implementing research in humanitarian contexts may need to make adaptations to the following:

Profile of enumerators hired for data collection

Distrust of the motives of data collectors, in addition to data collection challenges, can make it difficult to collect reliable and valid data in humanitarian contexts. Providing data collection training to people who are trusted and known by communities and live within the same setting can help to address such challenges. Training individuals who reside in refugee camps limits security concerns and builds local data collection capacity. We implemented this process during our impact evaluation of the World University Service of Canada's (WUSC) remedial education programme.

Data Collection in Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps

WUSC employs community mobilizers who live in the camps to incentivize girls to attend school and remedial education in Dadaab and Kakuma, Kenya. During the HEA evaluation of WUSC's remedial education programme, these same community mobilizers collected household-level survey data and conducted teacher observations.

Researchers who plan to collect data in humanitarian contexts need to consider working with individuals who already reside in insecure settings. While these individuals may not have much data collection experience, they are trusted by the community and are extremely familiar with the context.

Timing of data collection

In crisis contexts, instability can dramatically affect data collection plans. For example, a disruption in access to a refugee camp in one context limited the HEA's ability to collect quantitative, household-level data. These challenges show the importance of factoring in delays when planning for data collection in humanitarian contexts.

Approval process for data collection

Collecting data in humanitarian contexts often requires multiple ethical and government approvals, due to the importance of protecting vulnerable (refugee and host) populations. In Rwanda, for example, we were required to obtain data collection approval from both the Ministry of Disaster Management and Refugee Affairs and the Ministry of Education. It was also critical to obtain UNHCR approval to collect data in refugee settings in Jordan, Kenya and Rwanda. The approval process takes time and resources, which researchers and research commissioners need to factor in when planning data collection in crisis contexts.

Evaluation design

In both crisis and international development contexts, impact evaluation designs need to be adapted to suit the context and the specifics of programme implementation. This requires detailed knowledge about the specifics of the capacity, resources, targeting and rollout of the programme. Without such knowledge, researchers often do not have enough clarity with respect to when interventions are rolled out on the ground, especially when research teams have to coordinate with multiple stakeholders involved in the programme rollout (3ie, 2016).

Designing randomized controlled trials (RCT) or quasi-experimental studies with a control or comparison group is feasible and does not require changing the programme design when implementers have limited capacity or resources. When implementers have limited capacity, it is likely that the number of children and/or youth meeting eligibility criteria will surpass the number who can participate in the programme. In such cases, random selection of programme participants can be considered the most ethical way to distribute resources among eligible children and youth.

When programme participants are selected based on transparent and observable criteria, and baseline data are available for programme participants and non-participants, researchers have the opportunity to conduct quasi-experimental studies without changing the programme design. This requires detailed knowledge about the targeting of programme participants.

Designing impact evaluations that align with the implementation plan

To determine the impact of WUSC's remedial education programme, we conducted an RCT in Kakuma and a regression discontinuity design in Dadaab. In Kakuma, an RCT was feasible because the number of eligible students was larger than the number of students to whom WUSC could provide the programme. Providing a larger number of students with the programme could have reduced the quality of remedial education, so an RCT was the most ethical way to select programme participants.

In Dadaab, the number of eligible students was smaller, so we used a regression discontinuity design instead. In this design, we compared students who narrowly met the inclusion criteria with students who did not meet (but were close to meeting) the inclusion criteria.

Experiences from 3ie's Humanitarian Assistance Thematic Window also showed that impact evaluation designs in humanitarian contexts may need to respond to contextual changes to maintain rigor. For example, a study in Sudan required a substantial increase in sample size after an emergency in the field (3ie, 2016).

Recommendations

We have four recommendations for researchers and research commissioners who wish to conduct research in humanitarian contexts:

- 1** Researchers need to consider providing data collection training to—and working with—individuals residing in crisis settings, who are trusted by the community and familiar with the context. This also provides a capacity building opportunity to develop the skills of those within the community.

- 2** Researchers and research commissioners must partner with local research firms to streamline processes for obtaining multiple ethical and government approvals when planning and budgeting for data collection in humanitarian settings. These approvals help to protect vulnerable populations.

- 3** Researchers and research commissioners must consult closely with implementers and consider a wide range of evaluation methods. In doing so, it is feasible to design rigorous impact and process evaluations in humanitarian contexts that do not require changing the programme design, are appropriate for the context, and can credibly assess programme impact and implementation.

- 4** Researchers need to show flexibility and have a backup plan for when disruptive events limit their opportunities to collect data in unstable contexts. These backup plans help to minimize the risks of the evaluation.

Learn more

To discover more about the learnings coming out of the HEA, please visit our Medium publication, HEA Learning Series at: <https://medium.com/hea-learning-series> or contact us on: kenrhhea@unhcr.org.



Dr Marjorie Chinen from the American Institutes for Research (AIR) undertaking data collection in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya © WUSC/ LORENZO MOSCIA

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The Humanitarian Education Accelerator (HEA) is a UK Department for International Development (DFID) funded partnership between the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The HEA was created to build understanding on how to transform successful pilot projects into scalable educational initiatives for refugees and displaced communities worldwide. By developing a cohort of successful humanitarian innovators, we hope to build a strong evidence base of effective methods to scale and evaluate programmes for refugee education.

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