

## ONLY GOOD INTENTIONS? THE ROLE OF HIGH-QUALITY EVIDENCE IN CONFLICT-RELATED HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

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The handful of existing rigorous impact evaluations of cash transfers in humanitarian settings underscore that high-quality impactful research can be done in the direst contexts. But much more needs to be done to truly shape programming in conflict-related emergency settings. Addressing the research-programming divide may save lives in such contexts.

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### **High-quality research in humanitarian contexts is not a folly!**

Many of the 250,000 deaths during the 2011 famine in Somalia could have been spared if humanitarian action had taken place earlier. Lack of evidence was not to blame at the time: an early warning system was in place and blew the whistles some 11 months before the tragedy unfolded, with a timeliness, perseverance and precision that some experts—Hillbruner and Moloney (2012)—describe as “notable” compared with previous famines. In the intricate interplay of interests and incentives, evidence was simply ignored.

Do we always have such good evidence in escalating humanitarian contexts? Typically not. A recent systematic review of studies in the area of cash-based programs in humanitarian crises by Doocy and Tappis (2017) concludes that high-quality evaluations of such interventions are extremely rare. Out of the 4,000 studies they start reviewing only 123 make it to the “worth reading” stage. At the end only five studies are categorized as producing rigorous enough evidence through experimental and quasi experimental methods to assess the effects of cash transfers and vouchers across several individual and

household levels of wellbeing. Those studies were conducted in Democratic Republic of Congo, Ecuador, Niger, Lebanon and Yemen (Aker 2017; Hidrobo et al 2014).

Other ongoing research is highly promising. For example, the Unicef Office of Research and Lebanon Country Office are currently conducting a quasi-experimental evaluation of the pilot cash transfer program, which provides cash for education to displaced Syrian children (de Hoop, Morey and Seidenfeld 2018). Pure experimental evaluation could not be applied because of timing issues in the implementation of the program, but an ingenious regression discontinuity design is being developed to geo-reference schools in districts with and without the intervention. As this evaluation is being completed in Lebanon, discussions are underway to apply it to similar settings like Jordan.

Does this evidence make a difference? Absolutely yes, examples of high-quality research having made and continuing to make true difference in emergencies include Uganda's latest response to the massive influx of refugees. The design of the response pivots around a new cash grant, whose benefits have been simulated *ex ante* by the Government prior to its political decision. By their own estimates, this proposed grant might slash poverty among refugees by a third (Kiyangi 2017). In addition, UNICEF and UNCHR joint efforts in the city of Mosul, Iraq, have resulted in a startling dataset with unprecedented questions for refugees, displaced populations and residents on issues such as abandoned and undocumented children, mental stress, and integration with hosting communities that go well beyond the more traditional questions on receiving or not humanitarian aid (UNICEF 2017). In the context of the 2011-12 global food insecurity crisis, the World Bank developed safety nets readiness assessments to triage systems that were strong enough to be scaled up quickly a response to the crisis from those that lacked the capacity to embed food security specific interventions (Grosh et al 2011). And, more recently, the burgeoning literature on financial inclusion has proven to provide innovative alternatives to the delivery of cash transfers in fragile and emergency contexts such as, for instance, Niger. There, the electronic payment of a social transfer reduces by a third the overall travel time required, on average, to collect the transfer (Aker et al 2013).

### **The research-programming divide in humanitarian contexts**

Rigorous impactful research *can* be done in direst contexts. Yet *much* more needs to be done.

Available evidence is insufficient to truly guide the implementation of the few high-order consensus laboriously agreed by the humanitarian and developmental communities: cash is a preferred instrument to address emergencies—when markets exist and function reasonably well—; long term systems are better built from existing humanitarian schemes and should be preferred over parallel systems; the links between basic service provision must be strengthened (when they exist, the so called “cash plus” type of interventions) while keeping a close eye to community based informal mechanisms.

In effect, the number of high quality impact evaluations of cash interventions in emergencies pales in comparison with those already carried out in non-fragile contexts. These have been conducted for more than 25 years and have produced compelling pieces

of evidence in the hundreds, as summarized recently by a World Bank report (World Bank 2016). The consequence of the limited evidence on effective interventions in emergency contexts is that huge knowledge gaps remain unsolved: is cash always preferred to in-kind transfers in emergencies?; is conditionality justifiable in emergency contexts?; is a social protection system desirable over a well-established intervention scaled up for emergency rapid response? Hailed successes like the Ethiopian Productive Social Safety Net or the Kenyan Hunger Social Safety Net do not provide resounding answers as they have been built in circumstances other than humanitarian. How a successful rural based cash assistance program can be extended to urban areas remains in its infancy when it comes to rigorous research (Deveraux et al, forthcoming). A few examples of promising practices point to the need to adjust for the size of the city and the nature and exposure of the emergency, but little more than that is concluded (Gentilini 2015). New research on the impacts of conflict in Nigeria and the Cambodian genocide shows that the tenet of younger children being the most ill-affected by crises might not always hold, instead being adolescents those bearing the brunt of such catastrophes (Akresh et al 2012, Golmqvist and Pereira 2017). But equally innovative research looking at 100 years of natural disasters in Latin America finds the opposite result (Caruso 2017). What these age-specific impacts mean for emergency relief, intervention targeting, or post-recovery support cannot be emphasized enough—yet evidence is not conclusive.

Pondering how half full or half empty is the glass of evidence is pertinent but the critical question is how we can use the evidence we have—and more to come—more effectively than so far. Concretely, how can we bridge the humanitarian-development divide if we do not fix before the research-programming divide, whereby high-quality evidence is shelved off, ignored or discontinued, failing to reach out those making decisions in the direst conditions?

Stefan Dercon's recent book on how to "Dull Disasters" gives a compelling answer (Clarke and Dercon 2016). We address emergencies through planning, evidence-based responses, and stand-by financing. It is only through the combination of the three—and starting off before the next crisis strikes—that most vulnerable countries could do better than repeatedly appealing for money to the international community. Ultimately, it is about setting a credible social protection that will be there when the wind blows in a different direction. For those thinking that there is a chicken-and-egg situation in terms of what comes first, planning or money, Professor Dercon also has a good answer: first you plan with a clear understanding of who owns the risk to be tackled, and only then you prepare yourself by building your capacity and bulging your resources.

### **But is it really possible to plan based on high quality evidence in conflict-related emergencies?**

Somalia again provides an answer. After several years of planning, the federal government has a national development strategy with a resilient social protection pillar that includes responses to humanitarian crises. The traditional appeal at the onset of the year 2017 did still mobilize a whopping one billion dollars that contributed to avert the imminent famine

in the first quarter of 2017 and arguably saved many lives—in stark contrast to 2011. Yet, the sustainability of this approach during subsequent crises cannot be taken for granted. Thus, the then Somalian Minister of Humanitarian Affairs and Disasters Management, Mrs. Qasim’s plea to the international community could not have been clearer: members of the international community, align behind our national development strategy and let us coordinate the upcoming resources in a way that is predictable and credible (Qasim 2017). Six years after a harrowing famine, Somalia is on its way to showcase how evidence, lessons-learnt based planning can support effective programming in the direst circumstances. Money is not everything after all but when backed up with good evidence it *does* make a difference.

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