



Briefing Paper:
Synthesizing Practices of Evidence Appraisal
in the Humanitarian Field

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The Humanitarian Evidence Programme

Briefing Paper: Synthesizing practices of evidence appraisal in the humanitarian field

For the full report, please [visit this link](#).

This Briefing Paper summarizes the key findings of a longer paper on evidence appraisal practices to inform evidence syntheses in the Humanitarian Evidence Programme.¹ It is addressed to all audiences interested in humanitarian evidence, including but not limited to researchers, humanitarian practitioners, and policymakers. The paper helps answer the question, 'How confident are we in the quality of evidence supporting a finding?' For the full paper, [please visit this link](#).

Evidence appraisal is integral to the review process: when clear and context-appropriate, it contributes to the transparency and rigor of the review.² Rather than prescribing a particular evidence appraisal approach, the Humanitarian Evidence Programme summarizes evidence appraisal practices relevant to the humanitarian field and offers some suggestions in critically applying them to the realities of humanitarian data analysis, synthesis, and interpretation.

As discussed in relevant literature and in the programme's own [Guidance Note](#),³ there are challenges in data collection that set evidence syntheses in the humanitarian field apart from reviews in other disciplines. In brief, these limitations include:

- Defining key terms, including interventions and outcomes, may be complex in ways that affect the scope of the review question, the eligibility criteria and their interpretation, and the search strings;
- The design and implementation of studies varies from that of a controlled, laboratory setting in ways that affect data collection, biases, errors, and results;
- The vast 'grey literature' (e.g., programme documents, needs assessments, and internal reports) is difficult to search;
- Data may be limited or of poor quality, and methodologies are often not clearly discussed.

This is not to suggest that research in the humanitarian context cannot achieve or strive for high standards of rigor and validity. Rather, based on the above, it becomes apparent that, while humanitarian evidence syntheses can borrow insight from existing appraisal schemes, these approaches need to be tailored according to the following assumptions:

- Evidence appraisal is an integral part of systematic evidence synthesis;
- Evidence appraisal approaches depend on the evidence synthesis question and context;
- All studies included in a review, regardless of their design or publication status, should be appraised. This may require the combination of appraisal tools to reflect a diversity of methodologies and approaches;

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² The term 'review' is used in this document to refer to all evidence synthesis outputs of the program. The term 'systematic review' is used to refer only to that particular approach to evidence synthesis. For more on the programme's approach and outputs, please consult Roxanne Krystalli, Eleanor Ott, Elizabeth Stites, "Evidence Synthesis in the Humanitarian Field: Opportunities, Challenges, and Guidance," *Oxfam GB – Feinstein International Center*, 2015.

³ Roxanne Krystalli and Eleanor Ott, "Guidance Note: Evidence Synthesis in the Humanitarian Evidence Programme," Oxfam GB and Feinstein International Center, http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/~media/Files/policy_and_practice/conflict_disasters/HEP_call%20for%20proposals/HumEvi_Guidance_Note.ashx.

- Those conducting evidence syntheses should attempt, where possible, to address missing methodological information and data;
- A study appraised as 'low confidence' can still be instructive for an evidence synthesis;
- Evidence appraisal decisions should be documented and justified, similarly to other decisions in evidence syntheses.

These parameters are discussed in greater length in the full report. The full report also summarizes a series of existing evidence appraisal schemes that may be relevant to the humanitarian field. An Excel catalogue of the reviewed approaches is available on the Oxfam and FIC programme websites.⁴

The Humanitarian Evidence Programme at a glance: The Humanitarian Evidence Programme is a partnership between Oxfam and the Feinstein International Center at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University (FIC). Between June 2014 and December 2016, the Humanitarian Evidence Programme is commissioning a set of evidence syntheses that synthesize humanitarian research around different questions of interest to the sector. Some of these evidence syntheses follow a strict, more classical systematic review approach, while others are practice reviews or other evidence synthesis outputs, depending on the nature of the question and the amount, quality, and type of data available to answer it.⁵ The topics of these reviews arose from consultations with researchers, humanitarian practitioners, and policymakers to identify priority areas for evidence synthesis. Findings are communicated to researchers, policymakers and practitioners in the humanitarian field, with the ultimate goal of improving humanitarian policy and practice. The programme is funded by UK aid from the UK government; however, the views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

This paper is part of a series of documents on evidence synthesis in the humanitarian field. Documents of particular interest in this series include a [mapping](#) of existing humanitarian evidence syntheses and corresponding discussion of the [methodology](#)⁶ and a [guidance note](#) discussing opportunities, challenges, and approaches to evidence synthesis in the humanitarian field.⁷

⁴ See <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/hep> and <http://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/the-humanitarian-evidence-program/>.

⁵ The term 'review' is used in this document to refer to all evidence synthesis outputs of the program. The term 'systematic review' is used to refer only to that particular approach to evidence synthesis. For more on the program's approach and outputs, please consult Roxanne Krystalli and Eleanor Ott, "Evidence Synthesis in the Humanitarian Field: Opportunities, Challenges, and Guidance," *Oxfam GB – Feinstein International Center*, 2015.

⁶ Kristin Bushby, "Map of Humanitarian Evidence Syntheses, 2009-2015," (Feinstein International Center – Oxfam GB: 2015), http://fic.tufts.edu/assets/Mapping-Humanitarian-Evidence_Insights-and-Challenges.pdf.

⁷ Kristin Bushby, Roxanne Krystalli, "Mapping Evidence Syntheses in the Humanitarian Sector: Insights and Challenges," (Feinstein International Center – Oxfam GB: 2015), http://fic.tufts.edu/assets/Mapping-Humanitarian-Evidence_Insights-and-Challenges.pdf.