Research with vulnerable populations in humanitarian crises: ethical challenges and overlooked areas

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What is research

• 'the systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions’.

• ‘an original investigation undertaken to gain knowledge, understanding and insight’.

• human research: research ‘conducted with or about people, or their data or tissue’, including the involvement of people through surveys, interviews or focus groups.
Research in humanitarian crises?

• ‘Operational research’: assessments, monitoring and evaluation
• ‘Policy research’
• Academic research
Why do we need ‘operational’ research in humanitarian crises?

Humanitarian standards

• Sphere: humanitarian aid will be based on assessment of needs & capacities
• CHS: programs will be based on an impartial assessment of needs/risks, and an understanding of vulnerabilities/capacities of different groups

Relevance, effectiveness, efficiency

• Informing program design
• Continuous learning and improvement

Accountability

• CHS: affected people can expect resources to be managed efficiently, effectively & ethically
• Can’t know this without research of what worked & what didn’t
• Accountability to donors and value for money

→ Plus influencing others (justifying proposals, media, advocacy)
Is research acted upon?

We conduct research to inform decision-making. But:

• The link between assessments/evaluations and decision-making is tenuous.
• ‘Most assessments are conducted in order to substantiate a case made for funding by a particular agency or to do a particular thing’.
• ‘Only a minority of evaluations are effective at introducing evident changes or improvements in performance’
Key considerations in humanitarian crises:
1. The justificatory threshold

- Participants likely to be focused on immediate needs
- Likely to be negatively impacted (security, re-traumatisation, inconvenience)
- Risk of raising expectations

Burden to participants must be justified by the benefits to them

See questions in: MSF Research Ethics Framework - Guidance Document
2. Safety/security

- Physical safety, including travel to/from research site
- How is research perceived by political/religious/social groups
- How are researchers perceived?
  - aid agencies are seen as associated with the govt in ‘nearly every contested environment’ (2017 Aid worker security report)
  - Al Shabaab: ‘all NGOs work for spying agencies’
- Can the research inflame social tensions?

Benefits of research must justified **the risk of harm**
How can the process be improved?

1. Recognising and accommodating vulnerability

- People affected by crises are likely to be vulnerable & susceptible to exploitation & abuse
- Research strategies should articulate how researchers will be sure not to exacerbate vulnerabilities:
  - analyse vulnerability
  - consider specialized expertise
  - analyse the cost of participation (psychological, safety/security, time)
How can the process be improved?

2. Confidentiality & informed consent

• ‘Respect’ includes respect for privacy, and respect for informed choice to participate.

• Confidentiality = right to remain anonymous.

• Informed consent
  – often not properly obtained
  – see ACFID & MSF list of information to be provided to participants.
How can the process be improved?

3. Feedback to research participants

- Part of research merit & integrity, and respect
- Frequency neglected because:
  - Use of external consultants
  - reports often in English
  - low literacy-levels
  - research results may be sensitive
  - staff unaware of ethical obligations
  - no time
Resources on ethical research in humanitarian crises

- Ethical Guidelines
- Principles and Guidelines for ethical research and evaluation in development
- MSF Field Research
- MSF Research Ethics Framework - Guidance Document