

Improving Assessments

Introduction

This paper is an input to the discussion of how to improve current assessment practice in the humanitarian sector. It is informed by the experience of the Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS).

ACAPS is based on the premise that in order for the humanitarian sector to make the best decisions, humanitarian action must be based on an *objective and impartial* assessment of the needs of the affected populations and the risks they face.

The discussion within the humanitarian community of how to achieve this goal is characterized by a good deal of confusion and strongly divergent opinions. There is a tendency for the discussion to be framed as a choice between a) strengthening the capacity of *the system* to produce impartial or objective assessments and b) an alternative *independent* assessment setup where the main actors driving the assessment process do not have any operational role.

The two propositions are driven by different concerns. The *system* proponents are worried that a *second opinion* will create confusion and have a negative impact on humanitarian action, while the proponents of independent assessments are concerned that it is agency interest rather than needs that drive the agenda, unless some kind of checks and balances are in place.

In a sense both of these concerns are valid. In some operations deep disagreements about numbers, methodology and/or the severity of a crisis have had a paralyzing effect on donors and agencies alike. In other operations various humanitarian agencies have managed to dominate the humanitarian narrative and skewed the operation towards agency or sector interest. It is clear that both of these problems must be addressed and this requires a complex approach rather than a silver bullet, which will fix all problems.

This paper is based on the firm belief that the vast majority of the actors engaging in the needs assessment discussion are driven by an honest desire to improve humanitarian action and achieve better outcomes for disaster affected populations. At the same time there is a serious lack of trust between the actors engaging in the discussion. This must be addressed in order to move the assessment agenda forward in a constructive manner.

The Assessment Ecosystem

The overall idea proposed in this paper is to foster an *assessment ecosystem*, which provides *contrasting and complementary* perspectives to decision-makers in the humanitarian community. This will enable the humanitarian community to operate with as objective and impartial an assessment as possible.

There are in particular three aspects of an ecosystem that are attractive in this context:

- *Diversity*: In order for an ecosystem to function it must comprise different species with different functions and capabilities. An assessment ecosystem creates an inclusive vision for all the assessment capabilities in the humanitarian sector, and diversity becomes a strength rather than a weakness.
- *Interconnectedness*: The different species in an ecosystem relate to each other. An assessment ecosystem emphasises the importance of close collaboration and trust between the members of the system.
- *Evolution*: An ecosystem is dynamic and changes according to the environment. An assessment ecosystem should be able to adapt in order to provide context specific solutions to increasingly diverse crises. Evolution also entails that new species will be able to enter the

system, for example, ensuring a close collaboration between international and national capacities in a sudden-onset disaster.

This paper will consider three issues, which are important to understand how an assessment ecosystem could be fostered. These are:

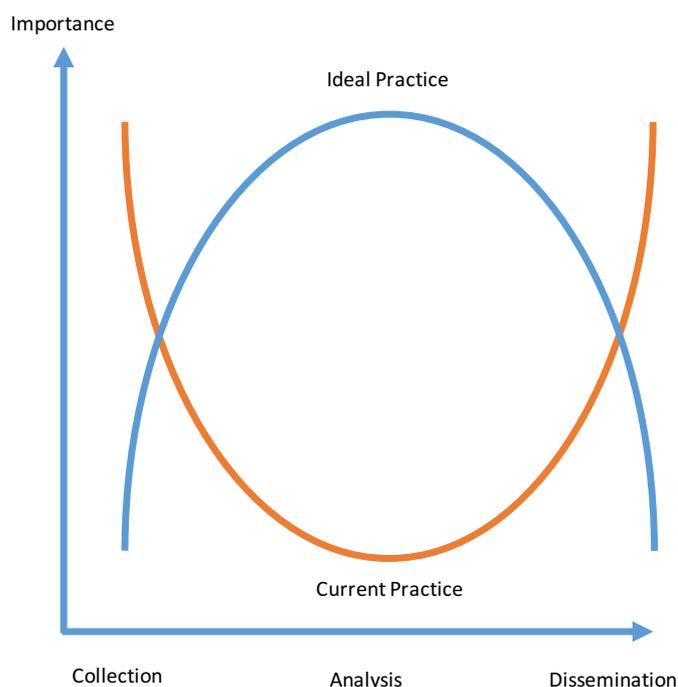
- The relative importance of *analysis, data collection and dissemination*;
- The implications of conducting assessments in situations with *uncertainty and political bias*.
- The difference between the *strategic (crisis) and the operational (programme) levels*

Finally, the paper presents four strategic directions, which must be followed in order to foster the assessment ecosystem.

Make sense, not data

The term *assessment* is used in different ways. Sometimes it is used in a very narrow sense to mean primary data collection in the field. “Assessment” is however also used in a much broader sense as an overall description of sense-making processes in relation to a crisis.

In this paper “assessment is used to describe three main activities: collection, analysis and dissemination of data. Improving assessment practices cannot be achieved without striking the right balance and relationship between these three core processes. On the graph below the orange line represents current practice. It is heavily focussed on collecting data and on dissemination¹ while analysis is generally is superficial and weak



The blue line represents best practice. Assessments are driven by analysis, supported by targeted primary data collection, and results are disseminated through a few highly strategic information products. A shift from the orange to the blue approach will improve the quality and speed of assessments. The much criticized assessments in relation to the Haiti Earthquake 2010, the Pakistan Floods 2010 and Hurricane Haiyan in 2013 are representative examples of *orange* practice, whereas the assessment cell in the 2015 Nepal Earthquake was more of a *blue* assessment process.

¹ Since 2010 the average number of documents per crisis published on Reliefweb has increased from 200 to 800.

In terms of the assessment ecosystem this means that the primary challenge is not new independent *data collection capacities*, which work in parallel to the data collection being undertaken by the clusters and agencies in the mainstream humanitarian architecture. A *blue* practice would enable better use of existing data, primarily through the contribution H2H² entities - small specialized, interoperable humanitarian actors. This is already reality in many operations, where clusters, HCTs, agencies and other humanitarian stakeholder receive specialized support from H2H. For example:

- UNOSAT provides support with satellite imagery
- Ground Truth contributes with perception surveys of the affected populations
- ACAPS provides both its own analysis as well as analytical capacity for other agencies
- MapAction provides mapping/GIS capacity
- REACH provides data collection capacity to a number of agencies and clusters.
- Flowminder is specialized in tracking population movements using data exhaust from mobile phones
- The Digital Humanitarian Network provides a range of capabilities for example around crowd sourcing or social media monitoring.

The capabilities exist in symbiosis with mainstream humanitarian actors. H2H does not replace mainstream humanitarian agencies assessments, rather they supplement and enhance these capabilities. What is lacking is a more strategic approach to the entire ecosystem, both to lower the threshold for H2H capabilities to be used, and to ensure that all the members of the ecosystem are robustly networked, so the most efficient collaboration occurs.

Dealing with uncertainty and bias

There are two main issues which may prevent the analysis of a humanitarian situation from being objective and impartial:

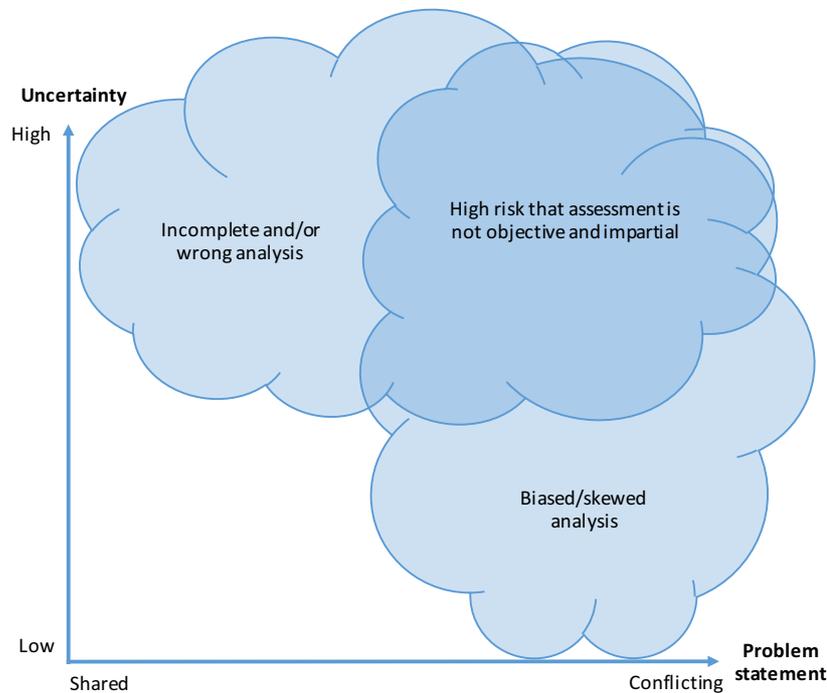
- *Uncertainty*: Humanitarian decision-making frequently takes place in an environment of high uncertainty due to of lack of timely and precise data, the dynamic nature of crisis and the pressure to make decisions quickly. The higher the uncertainty of a given situation, the higher the risk of humanitarian action being based on incomplete or wrong analysis. A common problem is that geographical areas where comprehensive assessments have been carried out receive more assistance than severely affected areas, which have not been properly assessed.
- *Bias*: The humanitarian sector is diverse organizations have different mandates and sector expertise and look at a crisis using different perspectives/lenses. This influences the way the crisis is perceived.³ In addition political interested may influence the priority which is given to for example a specific population group or geographical area.

The risks created by uncertainty and bias are illustrated in the figure below. In the lower left corner uncertainty is low (information rich environment, stable situation without time pressure) and the main actors agree on the nature of the problem. The main assessment challenge in this context is to collect, analyse and disseminate information on the scale and severity of the crisis. An example of such a situation could be seasonal flooding in district where humanitarian actors have extensive experience with response to such situations.

² *H2H* means Humanitarian-to-Humanitarian and is a term inspired by the *B2B* (Business-to-Business) concept. It is used to describe the numerous small humanitarian actors who are provide services to the humanitarian system rather than directly to the affected populations.

³ In popular terms: To a hammer every problem looks like a nail.

Moving away from the lower left corner, either because of increased uncertainty or because the main actors fundamentally disagree on the nature of the crisis, makes it more difficult to assess the situation. The 2015 Ebola outbreak in West Africa is an example of a crisis which was highly dynamic, with large information gap and pressure to make decisions. In addition, there was, at least initially, little agreement on the nature of the crisis.



This paper began by describing dual tendencies to either be concerned about the risk of confusion being created by “second opinions” or of political/institutional bias skewing the the results of assessments. The graph shows that we have to be concerned about both of these issues in different types of situation.

The assessment ecosystem must be sufficiently diverse to ensure that contrasting and complementary perspective emerge in *clouded* situations with uncertainty and politics. At the same it must be robustly networked and enough trust between actors to ensure that diversity does not result in multiple, parallel perspective delivering incompatible results without reference to each other.

Levels of assessment

It is useful to distinguish between two different levels of assessment:⁴

- At the *crisis level* scale and severity is assessed with respect to geographical areas (most affected areas), population groups (humanitarian profile) and priority sectors. This top-level assessment of the situation creates a shared situation awareness between the major stakeholders, and enables them to set priorities across sectors and geographical areas. MIRA is a good example of such an assessment.
- At the *programme level* assessments are conducted by a cluster or single agency to inform programming. This type of assessment is highly technical in nature and often required

⁴ It is also relevant to discuss the global level in terms of how funding is allocated between crisis and how a global severity ranking could create more clarity at this level. However, it is a somewhat different and very complex issue, and has therefore been left out of this paper.

extensive primary data collection. An example of this is the household food security assessment.

The difference between crisis and programme assessments is important because:

- The two assessments tend to differ with respect to uncertainty and diversity of problem statement as shown on the figure below. Actors undertaking a programme level assessment generally have a shared understanding of the problem, whereas the crisis level assessment brings together more diverse actors and perspective, often resulting in conflicting problem statements.
- Whereas crisis level assessments tend to be heavily based on secondary data, programme assessments often entail a heavy primary data collection at a very granular level. In addition, programme assessments often require a high level of technical expertise within the specific area.

These two issues point in the same direction: Programme level assessments are best carried out in a close collaboration between the agencies directly involved in response. When it comes to crisis level assessment, there is a need for more diversity to ensure the right level of contrasting and complementary perspectives.

Fostering an eco-system

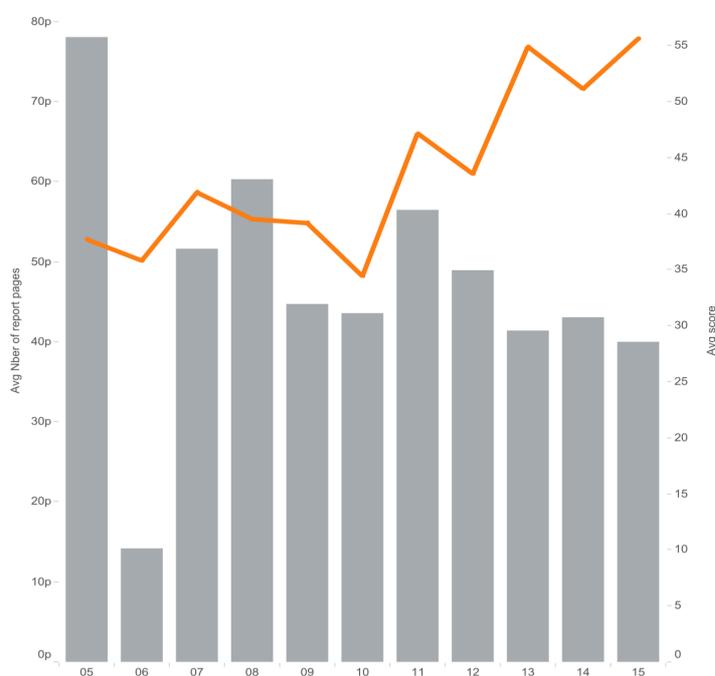
Making sense of crisis is the collective responsibility of all humanitarian stakeholders and cannot be outsourced to an *independent* agency. A healthy assessment culture in the humanitarian sector will ensure that all humanitarian actors operate with a *shared situation awareness* – that they are on the same page. As outlined in this paper, this is best achieved through an ecosystem of interdependent actors, who through their interaction produce *contrasting and complementary* perspectives, leading to the most objective and impartial humanitarian narrative possible.

There are four different strategies that should be pursued in order to develop the ecosystem:

1. Develop the vision: The first step in creating the ecosystem is to formulate an overall vision for what the ecosystem should deliver. Some of the obvious focus areas would be:
 - Better evidence for global allocation of funding between crisis
 - Strengthening Early Warning/Horizon scanning
 - Better integration of affected population perspectives in assessments
 - Improving the crisis level assessments to ensure clearer priority setting at the crisis level
 - Monitoring needs over the course of a crisis to determine *when the job is done*
 - Improving use of big data and crowd sourcing
2. Strengthen the nodes: Secondly there is a need for a substantial investment in the individual members of the ecosystem. This must be done in a mix between agencies strengthening their internal capacities and investment in specialized H2H entities that can provide services to the overall community.
3. Connect the dots: Maybe most importantly issue is to ensure a close interaction between the different members of the ecosystem. This will ensure that the ecosystem strikes the right balance between contrasting and complementing each other, according to context. This should be done through a mix of joint trainings, opportunities for joint analysis (as for example the IASC Early Warning, Early Action group) and operational collaboration (For example the Whole of Syria approach or the Nepal assessment cell).

4. Monitor the outcome: Finally, it is important to monitor the health of the ecosystem and have a dialogue on whether the quality of evidence for decision-making is improving over time. One way of doing this is by systematically rating the quality of the assessments produced. On the following page is an example how this could be done. The graph is from an analysis that ACAPS carried out of 105 multi-sectoral coordinated needs assessments, which were conducted between 2005-2015.⁵ The graph shows that over this period of time reports at the same time have become shorter while at the same time containing more relevant information. This type of monitoring is essential to be able to determine whether the ecosystem is evolving in the right way, adopting according to lessons learned, changes in the operational context and the emergence of new actors.

Less blabla and more **content**, especially in the last five years



The objective of this document has not been to deliver a fully developed vision of the composition and functioning of the assessment ecosystem. Rather, the objective is to start a dialogue between the main stakeholders in the humanitarian sector, so that the vision for the ecosystem can be co-created and co-owner by the main stakeholders. This is essential as the assessment ecosystem is there to serve the humanitarian sector, and if it is not broadly owner and accepted within the sector it will not be able to fulfill its function.

⁵ For the full report see: <http://acaps.org/img/documents/a-acaps-review-of-multisectoral-coordinated-needs-assessment-reports-11-jan-2016.pdf>