

Research-Practice Nexus in Qatar's Humanitarian Ecosystem

Joint-Conference Report

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Introduction

The State of Qatar has been quite active in providing international humanitarian aid during disasters and crises over the last two decades. Emergency relief and response with a focus on ending conflicts have greatly expanded over the years. While humanitarian activities have been generous, little research has been conducted to inform national policies and guide humanitarian actors' activities and operations. Highlighting and reflecting on the policy-research divide in the humanitarian sector was at the centre of the discussions in a webinar organized by the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS) in partnership with the Regulatory of Charitable Activities Authority in the State of Qatar known as RACA. The webinar sought to address issues including efforts of research centres, state of research funding, and the overall interactions between governmental institutions and humanitarian organizations. The focus of the conference was on the facilitation of institutional ideas and experiences and the dissemination of recommendations and lessons learned by international experts.

The Humanitarian and Research Environment in Qatar

It was made clear in the introductory remarks that a joint-learning process must take place between relevant actors and it is vital that research underpins the work of Qatari NGOs to manage risks, particularly operational, and improve impact through the utilisation of research. An important aspect in bridging the gap in the research-practice nexus is helping direct Qatari funds more effectively to increase impact.

Objectives of the webinar

Key objectives of the webinar that were pointed out as follows:

- The necessity for an assessment of the role evidence-based research that could play to support Qatar's humanitarian activities.
- The transfer of knowledge and lessons learned.
- The development of a plan for joint action to establish priorities for policy/academic research on humanitarian and charitable activities by Qatari organizations; and
- The support of the relevant authorities to sponsor research in the humanitarian sector.

Following the introductory remarks, an explanatory video was presented showing RACA's role and the activities undertaken by Qatari humanitarian actors across the world. RACA's role is to help develop, support, supervise, and protect Qatari humanitarian agencies' operations in more than 50 countries. As a result, the development of an e-governance system that allows beneficiaries to track funding allocations and their impact has been prioritised. For matters of political sensitivity, this is fundamental as it aids in countering any forms of illicit funding and demonstrates a clear difference between state and non-state funding. It was illustrated that a crucial area for improvement relates to the inability to exploit the double nexus of research and practice, which holds immense potential for delving deeper into issues, directing operations and policy, and supporting the developmental goal of 2030 and Qatar's overall priorities.

The Qatar National Research Fund representative highlighted research priorities and Qatar's research agenda, developed by government. These priorities are six-fold: the enhancement of knowledge and education, the development of research talent within all sectors, the diversification of the Qatari economy, the improvement of the health and well-being of the population, the preservation of the environment,

and the maintenance of the security of its employees through support for original and competitive research in the scientific sector. Four stages were identified to uphold these priorities, the first focusing on input to output, the second on output to outcomes, the third on outcomes to economic and social impacts, and the last on maturity and spread. Agendas implemented to support the four stages include capacity-building programs, a boost of research grants, and the advancement of activities and programs to connect and promote research.

International Panel

To better prepare and equip Qatari research institutions and humanitarian actors in their mission to interconnect, internationally recognized institutions shared their experiences and expertly suggested recommendations on bridging the gap. One such institution was ODI-HPG. An important aspect guarding the integrity of their role and conduct is their ability to operate on the margins of the humanitarian system and yet remain independent of it. To this effect, ODI-HPG engages in discussions and offers advice and reflections on lessons learned, thereby informing best practice. Its approach is focused on the development of ideas through research aimed at improving policymaking and humanitarian practice to promote more impactful operations. It further acts as a platform to bring different sectors together, such as on the policymaking level, donor level and humanitarian institution level to amplify the voices of marginalized groups. In addition to its longer-term research cycle, HPG has short-term cycles that ensure its analysis is current and relevant to the dynamics of conflict and conflict response.

In Norway, the U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre at CMI works to develop knowledge for global development and justice. Funds raised to support its research functions and knowledge generation are done so through the utilization of several channels such as through annual core funding from the Norwegian Research Council and basket funding from various sources. Longer-term research projects, evaluation framework agreements, and research framework agreements - all of which require funding - are utilised to support strategies and annual priorities which are decided upon in consultation with donors. Beneficially applying research funds to the humanitarian operations sector requires the development of the nexus in a manner that prioritises a two-way process. For example, humanitarian practitioner involvement in research and feedback ensures relevance and staying current. In this way, not only are donors and research institutions involved in directing research,

but the organizations on the ground are supporting them. Enlarging the pool of those engaged in policymaking minimizes the chances of getting it wrong.

The Norwegian Humanitarian Network, NCHS, operates in a similar manner in which tailored knowledge is mobilized by building upon existing research conducted. In this way, it capitalizes and amplifies existing research. A perennial question facing the ever-changing humanitarian system is how humanitarian efforts can be delivered effectively to maximize impact. Comparable to what was previously highlighted, significance is attached to bottom-up approaches in research in which communities, as well as humanitarian practitioners, are vital assets to the conceptualization of research.

Discussion

The discussion panel focused on the work carried out by three Qatari humanitarian institutions: Qatar Red Crescent, Qatar Charity, and Education Above All. It was highlighted that while the QRCS operates heavily on the ground, it also participates in research projects directed by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Similarly, it has created research agreements with local institutions such as the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies (DI) in which focus was placed on the implementation of basic humanitarian standards. QC highlighted the advantages that humanitarian agencies can offer research institutions such as the opportunities that these agencies have in being very close to conflict and disaster settings. In this way, they are an asset to research institutions that require reliable and updated information and data. Likewise, EAA shares consensus concerning the significance of research in developing policies of humanitarian organizations. Considering this, EAA's research focuses on influencing international agendas to promote evidence-based advocacy and to bridge the gap between research institutions and NGOs. One such example is the development of an online educational database that brings together policies from around the world and links them to practices on the ground to improve the quality of education and to contribute to sustainable development.

Actions, Insights and Recommendations

Reflecting on the points made during the conference and the limited funding offered to humanitarian institutions, academics and researchers can begin to deliberate on how to use national and research priorities to support practitioners.⁴



Such recommendations offered are, firstly, the utilization of impact-driven research, secondly, the strengthening of collaborative efforts between all academic institutions in Qatar to create an environment interested in humanitarian action that makes it easy for RACA to address humanitarian issues under one umbrella, thirdly, the documentation of practices by all humanitarian organization in the country, fourthly, the concentration on capacity-building measures in research that targets humanitarian practitioners and best practice, and finally, the creation of research partnerships with international agencies who can best guide a growing market in Qatar. From QNRF, it was recommended that the creation of a joint-research project be undertaken and to focus on strengthening the relationship between the banking sector and humanitarian actors to increase privatized financial assistance.

The international experts' panel suggested that to bridge the two sectors, Qatari institutions should identify common needs and areas for engagement and identify issues of common purpose and agendas of common interest. Furthermore, the support of an advisory group to direct and orient work is doubly critical given that the nexus in Qatar has yet to be fostered. Other critical recommendations are to start by sticking to pillars and clearly defined objectives to avoid losing sight and to build a trusted environment and honest approach in which mistakes and lessons learned can be shared to improve.