Bridging the Gap: Embedding Academic Research in Humanitarian Practice

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I. Executive Summary

Despite growing recognition of the importance of evidence-based humanitarian action, the divide between academic research and field-based humanitarian practice remains wide. This gap is especially evident in protracted and politically sensitive crises, where decisions are often made without access to timely, locally grounded evidence. While academia can offer vital insights into the political, social, and ethical challenges shaping humanitarian response, its impact is blunted by structural, institutional, and cultural barriers.

This brief outlines key obstacles to effective engagement between researchers and humanitarian actors and proposes a focused agenda for integrating research within the architecture of humanitarian response.

II. The Challenge: Structural Disconnects

1. Different Clocks, Different Cultures
Academic research is often slow-moving, with peer-reviewed studies taking years to publish. Humanitarian actors, by contrast, must make decisions within days or weeks, under intense pressure and with limited information (Leeming, 2019; Leresche et al., 2019). The result is mutual frustration: practitioners view research as irrelevant, while researchers see their work sidelined.

2. Weak Research Infrastructure in Crisis Contexts
In many regions, including the Arab world, the humanitarian sector operates with limited engagement from local research institutions. Where such institutions exist, they are often peripheral to programme design or strategic planning. Few humanitarian agencies have embedded research units or sustained partnerships with universities (Lokot and Wake, 2021; Patrick et al., 2019).

3. Funding Gaps
Donors rarely prioritise research as a standalone activity, and most humanitarian budgets omit research lines altogether. When funding does exist, it is often short-term, focused on evaluations rather than forward-looking or exploratory analysis. As a result, humanitarian actors are forced to rely on fragmented or outdated data (Elrha, 2023).

4. A Shrinking Pipeline of Expertise
There is a growing shortage of researchers with deep specialisation in displacement, conflict, and crisis settings. Long publication delays, low institutional recognition, and limited career pathways discourage early-career scholars (Leeming, 2019; NIH Fogarty, 2021). This weakens the sector's ability to generate context-sensitive knowledge over time.

5. Trust and Access Barriers
In insecure and politically volatile environments, researchers face access constraints, risks to personal safety, and suspicion from both authorities and communities. Aid organisations may also withhold information due to political concerns, further limiting researchers' ability to produce meaningful work (Lokot and Wake, 2021; GISF and Humanitarian Outcomes, 2024).

III. Policy Priorities

1. Embed Research Across Humanitarian Programming
- Integrate research components into needs assessments, programme design, and real-time monitoring.

- Encourage adaptive management practices that are responsive to emerging evidence.

- Recognise that embedding research requires staffing, time, and leadership commitment—not just external consultants.

2. Reform Funding Architecture
- Donors should include dedicated budget lines for research in all major humanitarian grants.

- Support flexible, long-term funding mechanisms to allow for sustained research collaboration.

- Promote joint funding models between academia, humanitarian agencies, and local actors.

3. Localise Research Leadership

- Invest in independent research institutions in crisis-affected contexts.

- Support the creation of hybrid platforms that connect local scholars, practitioners, and policymakers.

- Address power imbalances in global research partnerships to ensure relevance and equity.

4. Build a New Generation of Humanitarian Scholars

- Fund graduate-level scholarships, fellowships, and research placements focused on humanitarian studies.

- Encourage universities to incorporate humanitarian policy and practice into academic programmes.

- Create career pathways for researchers to work within humanitarian organisations and vice versa.

5. Make Knowledge Usable

- Translate research findings into short, actionable formats for operational and policy audiences.

- Disseminate findings through dialogues, policy platforms, and open-access digital repositories.

- Promote co-production of knowledge between researchers and practitioners to enhance ownership and relevance.

IV. Conclusion

Humanitarian action is increasingly complex, politicised, and protracted. In such a landscape, acting without reliable, context-sensitive knowledge is no longer acceptable. Yet the divide between scholarship and practice persists—driven by institutional inertia, weak funding, and lack of trust.

To close this gap, research must be embedded in humanitarian structures, not tacked on as an afterthought. Funding must be restructured, new talent cultivated, and space created for rigorous, locally grounded inquiry. Only through such investments can research and humanitarian action move together—towards more adaptive, accountable, and effective responses.

Note: This paper summarises the findings and policy recommendations from a conference titled "Towards Effective Integration: Enhancing the Impact of Research and Field Practice in the Third Sector and a closed roundtable session "Strengthening Research in Qatar's Philanthropic and Development Sector: Challenges and Solutions.

Both events were organised by the Centre for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies in Qatar, November 2024 and the conference was convened in collaboration with the Regulatory Authority for Charitable Activities. The two workshops drew on the experience of participants from the academic, practitioner and research arenas

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