LITERATURE REVIEW

Emerging innovations and best practices in Social Research

Key takeaways for humanitarian and development action

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About IMPACT

IMPACT Initiatives is a Geneva based think-and-do-tank, created in 2010. IMPACT is a member of the ACTED Group.

IMPACT's teams implement assessment, monitoring & evaluation and organisational capacity-building programmes in direct partnership with aid actors or through its inter-agency initiatives, REACH, PANDA and Agora. Headquartered in Geneva, IMPACT has a footprint in over 30 countries with a team of over 400 staff members. Through our global team of research specialists, on average IMPACT publishes more than 2,000 information products on a yearly basis.

CONTENTS

a. List of Acronyms

3ie International Initiative for Impact Evaluation
AAP Accountability to Affected Population
AI Artificial Intelligence
AWS Amazon Web Services
BHA USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance
CAR Central African Republic
CFM Community Feedback Mechanism
CNA Common Needs Assessment
CTP Cash Transfer Programme
CVA Cash and Voucher Assistance
DRR Disaster Risk Reduction
ECHO European Commision's Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations department
EGM Evidence Gap Map
FEWSNET Famine Early Warning Systems Network
GIS Geographic Information System
HEC-RAS Hydrologic Engineering Center's River Analysis System
HOT Humanitarian OpenStreet Map
HPC Humanitarian Programme Cycle
HSM Humanitarian Situation Monitoring
ICT Information and Communication Technology
ICT4D Information and Communications Technologies for Development
IDMC Internal Displacement Monitoring Center
ILO International Labour Organization
IOM International Organization for Migration
IPC Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
IYCF-E Infanct and Young Child Feeding in Emergencies
J-PAL The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab
JENA Joint Education Needs Assessment
JIAF Joint and Inter-sectoral Analysis Framework
JNA Joint Needs Assessment
LSMS The Living Standards Measurement Study
MICS Multiple Indicator Clusters Survey Programme
MMC Mixed Migration Center
MPI Multi-dimensional Poverty Index

MSNA Multi Sector Needs Assessment
OA Open Access
OCHA United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODI Overseas Development Institute
OPHI Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative
PDM Post-distribution Monitoring
PUS Public Understanding of Science
RCT Randomised Controlled Trial
RFHA Rapid Flood Hazard Assessment
RNA Rapid Needs Assessment
ROL Rule of Law
SHG Self-help Group
SMART Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions
SOP Standard Operating Procedure
STC Save the Children
UNDP United Nations Development Programme
VAF Vulnerability Assessment Framework
VAM Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping

b. Figures, Tables and Maps

1. Introduction

Applied social research is a field of study which aims to understand and address real-world problems, through the application of research methods in sociology, psychology, anthropology and related fields, to gain insights into specific phenomena and inform decision-making in public policy and similar practical contexts. Over recent decades, the field has experienced transformative changes driven by technological advancements, globalization, and evolving methodologies. Moreover, social research has become essential in shaping humanitarian and development action, providing crucial insights that guide interventions, policies, and resource allocation, across different contexts of crisis.

As one of the largest independent research actors currently operating in crisis contexts,[1] IMPACT Initiatives (IMPACT), with support from the USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), launched an in-depth literature review at the beginning of 2024 to understand what the emerging innovations and best practices in the field of social research are, and how these can be applied for research efforts within the humanitarian and development sector.

This paper summarises the key findings from this literature review, broken down into four chapters. In chapter 2, the most important evolutions from the last decades will be discussed, from digital transformation, Open Access, globalization, and the emergence of more interdisciplinary and participatory research approaches. In chapter 3, some common applications of social research for humanitarian and development contexts from recent years will be discussed, including key innovations in terms of new technologies, methods and tools. In chapter 4, the relationship between social research and policymaking will be analysed, exploring how research influences policy decisions and the key challenges and enablers in this process. Case studies to illustrate successful integrations of research into policymaking will also be discussed within this chapter. Finally, chapter 5 will be dedicated to the conclusions and recommendations, summarizing key takeaways, offering suggestions and highlighting remaining information gaps that need to be addressed for future research efforts, by IMPACT or similar organisations.

[1] In 2023, IMPACT conducted nearly 600,000 interviews and published over 1,500 information products in over 30 different countries, to inform decision-making processes to prioritize aid where it is most needed. Read more in our 2023 Annual Report available here: https://www.impact-initiatives.org/annual-report/

2. Social Research in the 21st Century

2.1 What is Social Research?

If research can be defined as the systematic effort to investigate a specific issue and gain knowledge, social research can be considered as the application of scientific methods to find explanations, clarify doubts, and establish facts related to social phenomena, including interactions and experiences of human beings (Nafstad, 1982). Applied social research thus aims to understand and address real-world problems, through the application of methods in sociology, psychology, anthropology and related fields, to gain insights into specific phenomena and inform decision-making in public policy and similar practical contexts.

2.2 How have Social Research practices evolved over time?

With the start of the 21st century, the landscape of social research underwent irreversible transformations, both due to significant advancements in the fields of communications and technology, as well as wider shifts in societal dynamics. This sub-section will summarize some key aspects of this evolution.

(a) Digital transformation and Open Access

Over the years, **the arrival of the internet and rapid emergence of new technologies have arguably had one of the most significant impacts on the field of social research,** revolutionizing practices and shaping the way social realities are being investigated and understood. From digital data collection technologies and big data analytics to the rise of the Information and Communications Technologies for Development (ICT4D) movement,[2] researchers were able to collect, compare and disseminate big amounts of information in real-time. Additionally, "*the Internet made resources available through which people from various backgrounds could work on multi-disciplinary topics, social problems, and new aspects of research*" (Kümmerle, Waldenberger 2020).

Firstly, the emergence of the internet and the World Wide Web, completely changed the way researchers can carry out their jobs: no longer relying on archival research alone, spending hours in different libraries, digitalisation today has made both primary and secondary data collection faster and easier. The Internet allowed people to share content almost at no cost and instantly, resulting in massive content and information being easily available. As a result, discoveries became possible at a scale and speed like never before. This openness also enabled collaboration between researchers who work in different locations.

This free and fast availability of content for research purposes was further enabled by the advent of the Open Access movement (Laakso et al., 2011). Open Access, or OA, was born in 2001, with its first official recognition at the Budapest Conference. It is a publication model that guarantees free and unrestricted access for material produced by scientific

[2] The ICT4D movement wants to guarantee access to digital technologies to everybody, bridging the gap between countries and advancing global economic development. Read more here: https://ict4d.org/

research, and thus marks a significant evolution from the traditional model where academic publishers held exclusive rights to the material and sold this based on subscriptions and licenses. The basis of OA is the Open Archives Initiatives which was developed in 1999, resulting in the **creation of shared protocols, standards, and software to ensure communication between archives using open-source technological tools.** While the debate on the pros and cons of OA is still ongoing, its impact on knowledge production is inarguably huge. Not only does it guarantee access to an incredible amount of information in real time, for free, but it also makes research practices more inclusive by advancing citizen science initiatives and enabling equitable access for researchers from different countries (Tennant et al, 2016).

Another element of digitalisation that has completely revolutionized social research practices over the years has been the integration of emerging technologies for more efficient data collection, analysis and dissemination. As Kümmerle and Waldenberger note (2020), "*e-tools were introduced to accelerate research. Automated sampling devices and analytical tools were developed. With the advent of the cloud, software came to be provided on the Internet and researchers obtained access to high-computing power and advanced tools that they could not afford as individuals*". Digital innovations, especially the use of ICT for phone and internet-based data collection, have also advanced researchers' ability to sample and reach their population of interest, enabling researchers to reach new segments of populations otherwise inaccessible for different reasons, and increase the chance to develop representative samples for different studies (Meshcheryakova, Rogotneva, 2020). Within the humanitarian sector as well, the emergence of platforms such as Kobo Toolbox made data collection easier and more accessible for everyone, including NGO and Civil Society representatives conducting research in insecure conflict contexts. The evolution of Geographic information system (GIS) and remote sensing methods have also opened new opportunities in the field of scientific investigations, with the use of computer systems to analyse and display geographical information, as well as the scanning of the earth by satellite or high-flying aircraft to obtain information. Meanwhile, analysis, visualisation and dissemination of collected data is being enhanced by digital tools such as open-source codes (GitHub, Jupiter notebook), cloud computing platform (AWS), disciplinary platforms (NFFA, IMBE), and emerging AI-based solutions. AI in particular, while still being explored, could completely revolutionise the way research is conducted in the future (Kümmerle and Waldenberger, 2020). Emerging applications of GIS, AI and other digital innovations for social research are discussed further in Chapter 3.

Finally, when it comes to research dissemination, the use of social media and platforms like Google Scholar, as well as the creation of database tools and data repositories, have also been enabling better data archival and information sharing. Moreover, researchers are now able to quickly evaluate the outreach and outcomes of their work by using bibliometrics such as citation, h-index, the impact factor, and digital tools such as Altmetrics or Google analytics. As Kümmerle and Waldenberge observed (2020), "*Research metrics—such as the publication number, citations, h-index, journal impact factor—have made it possible to compare academics in a quantitative and seemingly objective manner, which was*

not the case in the past… they have enabled the public to have a say in what is happening in academia. Prior to the emergence of metrics, only experts in the specific discipline or subfield could evaluate which research was exceptional or not. Other researchers were not able to judge the quality of the research".

Over the last decades, digital innovations have thus shaped the way social research is conducted in every single phase, and the continued emergence of new tools, especially AI-based solutions, will continue modifying research practices in the coming decades.

(b) Globalisation

In addition to digitalisation, **globalisation has also had a significant impact on social research in multiple ways, influencing both the topics addressed and the process of social research itself.** According to Cuhna (2013), "*Globalisation has allowed the entry of new geographical areas in the scientific, academic and university channels, increasing the number of actors and consumers involved. On the other hand, it identified new objects and subjects of research and stimulated the emergence of new products with the potential for circulating globally*". In other words, the impact of globalisation on social research has been three-fold. First, it broadened the research context, making it easier for researchers to reach far away cultures and people, enlarging diversity and representativeness in study samples. Secondly, the topics of study have moved from national to regional to global issues, with topics such as climate change, migration, or inequalities, being increasingly explored from a global perspective. Finally, globalisation has facilitated the exchange of ideas and information from different parts of the world, resulting in stronger international collaborations and faster dissemination of new discoveries.

(c) Emergence of interdisciplinary approaches and mixed methods research

Interdisciplinary approaches in the social sciences began in the 1920s, but the formal concept of interdisciplinarity entered the literature only in the early 1970s. Scholars advocating for this evolution believed that **scientific pursuits had become less effective due to disciplinary fragmentation and that a countermovement for the unification of knowledge across different disciplines was needed** (Miller, 2010). As a result, over the years, lots of academic and scientific fields began using an interdisciplinary approach in research. Interdisciplinary research also emerged from the increasing acknowledgement that it is especially challenging to study globally significant issues, such as climate change or poverty, by examining them from a single perspective. For example, when it comes to addressing poverty, it is necessary to study the economic and political causes of it, together with sociological research on the social dynamics of the area or populations concerned, as well as studies to understand the cultural, psychological and behavioural influences this has on people and their societies.

In practice, interdisciplinarity resulted in an increasing reliance on mixed methods research approaches, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. According to Maxwell (2016), the use of mixed method approaches in social sciences

occurred much earlier than is generally acknowledged, and dates to as early as 1899, to an empirical field study conducted by W.E.B. Dubois combining urban ethnography, social history, and descriptive statistics. In subsequent years, mixed methods were also used in anthropological studies by Malinowski (1884-1942) and Herskovitz (1895 – 1963). Since its emergence, the rise of mixed methods research has also partially overcome the paradigm war between quantitative and qualitative methods. According to Bryman (2008), "*there has been something of a lessening of hostilities around the quantitative-qualitative divide… towards an increase in the explicit use of mixed methods research designs and a growing pragmatism and diversity in the ways in which such researchers view the integration of qualitative and quantitative data*". Mixed methods are particularly useful for social sciences, which requires a pragmatic, wide-angle lens to answer practical questions, by using all the data sources available, and the combination of the two methods comes with the promise to cancel out the respective weaknesses of each method (Hammersley, 1992).

(d) Public engagement and emergence of participatory research approaches

In an influential 1987 article, Thomas and Durant asked a question that remains pertinent today: "*why should we promote the public understanding of science"?* Five years later, the journal Public Understanding of Science (PUS) was launched as a forum for debating this question, as it grew in policy and practical significance (Lengwiler, 2008). This question was primarily motivated by an end-based debate on the importance of better public engagement (and scrutiny) in the field of science and technology. This debate emerged, and grew in significance, in the immediate after-war period in Europe, due to critical reactions of the public against the involvement of scientists in the First World War, mainly the participation of German and British scientists in the development of chemical weapons of mass destruction (Johnson, 2008).

Since then, a gradual shift can be observed in the means and processes of public engagement in research practices, including the engagement of those involved in the research process itself. Some of the earliest applications were in the fields of anthropology and sociology, pioneered by researchers like Malinowski who is considered to have invented participant observation as a research method in the early 1900s. The importance of making scientific investigations more participatory was collectively amplified by several social movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, such as the feminist movement, the anti-nuclear movement, and the ecological movement, all of which called for a "*social relevance*[3]" in science and technology policy (Nelkin 1977, and Wynne 2002). The first "*consensus conference*"[4] in biotechnology, which included participants from the public, was also organized in the United States in the mid-1970s; prior to this, similar conferences would only involve scientific experts (Guston 1999, Joss and Durant 1995, and Kelly 2003). More recently

[3] In research, 'social relevance' broadly refers to the co-production of knowledge with the wider public (i.e. beyond the scientific community) to strengthen connections between theory and practice. See also: Scaratti, G., Galuppo, L., Gorli, M., Gozzoli, C., & Ripamonti, S. (2017). *The social relevance and social impact of knowledge and knowing*. Management Learning, 48(1), 57-64. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507616680563

[4] 'Consensus Conference' is a kind of public meeting or gathering "which gives the general public the chance to contribute to and be involved in the assessment of an issue". It is therefore a forum for "dialogue between experts and citizens". Read more here: https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/methods/consensus-conference

within the public policy field, the Collaborative on Citizen Data Initiative developed the 'Copenhagen Framework on Citizen Data' to help conceptualise the different ways in which citizens can play a role in data production and usage, including the formulation of action points for statistical communities moving forward.[5]

Overall, increasing public engagement and participatory approaches over the years have resulted in an improvement in the process of conducting research, moving from homogenous to more inclusive practices (Epstein 2007).

(e) Methodological innovations

With the emergence of the Internet and digital technologies, researchers around the world have also been rapidly innovating on new approaches, tools and techniques for conducting social research. For instance, **in recent years, citizen science or 'crowdsourcing' has found increasing relevance and usage among social researchers, as it allows for a rapid collection of information from a wide audience**, where anyone from the public can contribute their ideas and perspectives to a given topic. One of the most prevalent applications of crowdsourcing for social research purposes has been social media monitoring, which is the process of identifying what is being said on online social media platforms (e.g. Twitter, Facebook) about a certain topic, and gathering first hand perceptions, experiences and opinions accordingly. Similarly, qualitative researchers have also found new digitised ways of conducting ethnographic research, including visual ethnography (e.g. use of audiovisual methods and transforming research findings into documentaries), and mobile ethnography (which allows researchers to observe recruited respondents who use smartphones to journal their everyday lives, behaviours, and perceptions by using photos, videos or notes in relation to a particular research topic).

Within the humanitarian and development sectors more specifically, one noteworthy methodological innovation has been the work of Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) on ensuring scientific evidence is available for policies aimed at alleviating poverty, specifically through the application of experimental methods such as Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs).[6] Their work on developing experimental approaches for poverty reduction also led to a Nobel Prize in Economics for two of J-PAL's founders in 2019. Other development research actors like the World Bank are also leading on innovations in applied statistics by testing applications of different sampling and analytical techniques, such as Adaptive Cluster Sampling, to increase research coverage of "hidden" or otherwise hard-to-reach populations. Specifically, adaptive sampling is a data collection technique where, instead of using a fixed sampling method, the strategy is adjusted based on emerging data characteristics and real-time information. Within the World Bank, this method was used for

[5] Read more here: https://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/statcom/session_55/documents/BG-4c-CGD_Framework-E.pdf
[6] Read more here: https://www.povertyactionlab.org/

multiple waves of data collection to improve learning for "policy choice problems" where the goal is to select the optimal intervention or treatment among several options.[7]

Beyond data collection, a lot of innovative approaches have also emerged in recent years to produce more nuanced, meaningful analysis and insights for decision-makers. For example, the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) developed by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) together with UNDP,[8] is a comprehensive tool to measure poverty and wellbeing across 110 countries by examining data across three dimensions of poverty (health, education, and living standards). The INFORM indices developed by a multi-stakeholder forum including the European Commission's Joint Research Centre offers "*quantitative analysis to aid in managing humanitarian crises and disasters*" across three different areas: 1) generalised risk analysis of a crisis based on structural conditions, 2) analysis of the severity of an existing crisis, and 3) analysis of projected changes to a structural crisis, including risks as a result of climate change. The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWSNET), established by USAID in 1985, analyses, monitors and forecasts acute food insecurity across different crises around the world.

(f) Ethical regulations and data privacy

Finally, in the last decades, **increased public recognition of the value of social research has been accompanied by heightened sensitivity to the obligation of conducting social sciences responsibly** (Fisher, Anushko, 2008). Within social research practices specifically, there are four areas of continued and emerging ethical concerns that have been studied in the past decades and still feed ongoing debates: conflicts of interest, informed consent, cultural equivalence and the use of monetary incentives.

Firstly, **conflicts of interest** endanger the relationships of trust between social researchers and research participants, as well as the scientific community and the public. When interests of professional, personal, financial or legal nature jeopardize the objectivity of data collection, analysis or interpretation, the trust and the validity of the research is compromised. It is thus of utmost importance to ensure that the objectivity of data analysis and interpretation is led by data and no other interests (Fisher, Anushko, 2008). Secondly, the **need to ensure respect for the autonomy and privacy of research participants** means it is imperative to obtain consent to participate in research in a way that is informed, rational and voluntary. However, securing informed consent becomes challenging in several circumstances such as with the inquisitive and open-ended nature of qualitative research, when research is conducted in international contexts (e.g. with migrants) which comes with language barriers, and in settings where the authority to grant consent lies with an individual other than the participants, such as in cultural contexts where women are required to obtain prior male permission. (Marshall, 2003 in Fisher, Anushko, 2008).

[7] Read more here: https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099337506232226851/idu078c6dff10259d0409d0997f0d753a7e2cb72
[8] Read more here: https://ophi.org.uk/global-mpi

Thirdly, the **principle of justice and the obligation to ensure the fair distribution of research benefits and burdens** across populations is connected to the concept of cultural equivalence. The dynamic and global nature of research environments introduces the potential risk of improperly extrapolating research findings from one participant demographic over others. Injustices may also arise when certain populations are deliberately or inadvertently excluded during recruitment, yet the study's outcomes are inappropriately generalized to encompass their social or psychological attributes and contexts (Fisher, Anushko, 2008). Lastly, **the ethical consideration about the use of cash incentives to secure and retain research participation** has raised questions about how monetary inducements will affect the quality of data as well as the equitable distribution of the benefits and burdens of research participation. Several scholars argue that the use of such incentives need to be carefully reflected on as they have the potential to compromise the voluntary nature of participation, undermining altruistic motivation, tempting participants to provide false information to qualify for study participation or induce dishonest responses to align with researchers' expectations (Attkisson et al., 1996; Fisher, 2003b; Saunders et al., 1999 in Fisher, Anushko, 2008).

Finally, **with research being increasingly conducted in an era of digital transformation and globalisation, concerns have also been increasing on the growing use of personal data and the need to regulate the responsible and secure usage of such data.** Adopted in 1980 and revised in 2013, the OECD guidelines on "*Privacy and transborder flows of personal data*" is one result of these growing concerns, with the revisions focusing on practical implementation of privacy protection through an approach grounded in risk management, and on a need for greater efforts to address the global dimension of privacy. New concepts were introduced, such as national privacy strategies, privacy management programmes and data security breach notifications.[9] Indeed, in recent years, researchers have started realizing the importance of protecting sensitive data related to respondents and beneficiaries, developing safe ways to protect, store and dispose of data, ensuring their work is aligned with the "no harm" principle. Within the humanitarian sector as well, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee published the first ever '*Operational Guidance on Data Responsibility in Humanitarian Action'* in 2023, to ensure "*safe, ethical and effective management of personal and non-personal data for operational response, in accordance with established frameworks for personal data protection"*.[10]

[9] Read more here: https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0188
[10] Read more here: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/operational-response/iasc-operational-guidance-data-responsibility-humanitarian-action

3. Social Research in the Humanitarian and Development Sector

In dynamic and rapidly evolving crisis contexts, planning and running aid programmes can be challenging. Often, limited time is available to properly understand the problems facing those affected by conflict or natural hazards, and what their immediate needs are. In these contexts, applied social research offers a unique opportunity to enable more evidence-based decision-making by aid actors, thus ensuring effectiveness, efficiency, and accountability of aid provided to crisis-affected communities. By bridging the gap between research and practice, applied social research can provide humanitarian and development actors with the required knowledge and understanding of crisis-affected communities to design and implement more needs-based and people-centred programmes.

This chapter will discuss in more detail some common research applications for humanitarian and development action from recent years, as well as some emerging innovations and best practices that could make aid action more effective and efficient in the future.

3.1 Survey methods used for research in humanitarian and development contexts

Over the past decades, **survey research has emerged as the most frequently used method to collect data across a range of disciplines,** and almost any field of study which requires information on individual perspectives, experiences and behaviours relies on this method (Saris & Revilla, 2015). As Meyer et al. (2015) rightly note, "*large and nationally representative surveys are arguably among the most important innovations in social science research of the last century*", having also become a key source of information for official estimates of unemployment, poverty, and any other statistics needed to guide socio economic policies around the world. **Within the humanitarian and development sector as well, survey research has proven to be a powerful tool to enable more accountable and evidence-based decision-making,** with aid actors increasingly relying on survey data to understand the needs, vulnerabilities and priorities of crisis-affected communities. If collected, analysed and used properly, survey data can enable any actor involved in the design and implementation of aid programmes to determine the scale and severity of need of affected populations, and understand how this varies between different geographical areas (e.g. regions, districts, livelihoods zones) and population groups (e.g. displaced and non-displaced households).

Although conducting robust survey research in contexts of crisis can be challenging, examples of high-quality, ethical, and actionable survey research for humanitarian and development action do exist. Some interesting examples are listed below:

- The Demographic and Health Surveys Programme (DHS) established by USAID in 1984 aims to improve the collection, analysis, and dissemination of population, health, and nutrition data to inform planning, policymaking and programme management across countries. There are two kinds of DHS surveys: the standard ones, which have a large sample size and are conducted every five years to allow comparison over time, and the interim ones, which focus on key performance

monitoring indicators with smaller sample size. Over the years, DHS has conducted more than 400 surveys in over 90 countries.

- Standardised Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions (SMART) Surveys is an inter-agency initiative launched by a network of humanitarian organisations and practitioners in 2002 to establish a systematized survey methodology that can provide "*critical, reliable information for decision-making*". The SMART methodology provides crucial data for two key health indicators to assess the magnitude and severity of a humanitarian crisis: nutritional status of children under five, and mortality rate of the affected population.
- Similarly, the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) is a UNICEF-supported household survey programme launched during the mid-1990s, which monitors the situation of children and women around the world. Over the years, MICS has become one of the world's largest household survey programmes, having covered more than 115 countries till date, and providing a wealth of data on topics such as fertility, mortality, unmet need, child development and nutrition (Khan & Hancioglu, 2019). A unique characteristic of MICS is the shared ownership with national statistical bodies, because of which it has reportedly been used for policymaking in at least 110 countries in the last two decades.
- Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) is the World Bank's flagship household survey programme launched in the early 1980s, with a goal to "*foster the development and facilitate the adoption of new methods and standards in household data collection for evidence-based policymaking*." The key component of LSMS is a multi-purpose survey that collects data on different dimensions of household and individual wellbeing, while also trying to understand the effects of various government policies on the living conditions of people in low- and middle-income countries. All data from the LSMS programme are publicly available and open access; the full datasets are available in the World Bank's Microdata Catalogue, and used in a wide range of publications, from government reports to top-tier economics journals.
- Lastly, the Joint Education Needs Assessment (JENA) Toolkit was first developed by the Global Education Cluster in 2010 to ensure that reliable and comparable data is available for education ministries and aid agencies to improve the quality and coordination of "education in emergencies" interventions.[11] The assessment framework covers both core education domains (e.g. access and learning environment, teaching and learning, etc.) as well as related thematic issues (e.g. early childhood development, inclusive education, protection, etc.).

3.2 Usage and applications for humanitarian and development action

Research methods applied in humanitarian and development contexts are similar to those anywhere else. However, and this is particularly true for sudden-onset disasters and volatile conflict settings, researchers often need to implement methods that can account for specific challenges faced in these settings, especially limited time and lack of access to the population of interest. **Over the years, research applications have proven especially valuable to produce three kinds of evidence for decision-making in crisis contexts:** 1)

[11] Read more here: https://resourcecenter.savethechildren.net/pdf/5166.pdf/

assessing needs among crisis-affected communities; 2) identifying those most affected and vulnerable to define needs-based prioritisation for aid delivery, and 3) monitoring and evaluating aid delivery programmes to determine effectiveness of different interventions in addressing these needs. All three of these are discussed briefly below.

(a) Assessing needs of crisis-affected communities

Over the last decade or so, **needs assessments have become an invaluable tool that is increasingly used by a vast majority of aid organizations to design and deliver needs-based aid interventions.** According to the UNHCR Needs Assessment handbook (2017),[12] "*a needs assessment is defined as a data collection exercise usually conducted at a single point in time (…) it is triggered by a need to better understand a particular situation and the conditions faced by populations of concern, whether in the context of a response to a sudden crisis or an ongoing planning effort during a protracted crisis*". Such assessments are thus critical to ensure that the needs of different population groups are identified and understood, and that key decisions around how resources are used is based on accurate, verifiable information.

Needs assessment can also be *common* (CNA), sometimes referred to as *Joint Needs Assessment* (JNA), when it is conducted collaboratively i.e. jointly implemented by more than one organisation. Such assessments are usually coordinated by a central body like a government agency, the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), an inter-agency body like an Assessment Working Group, a Cluster, or a group of non-governmental organizations (NRC, 2014). **Sometimes they must be implemented quite quickly to collect a series of information to inform emergency response planning (e.g. in the immediate aftermath of a sudden onset disaster)**; in this case, Rapid Needs Assessments (RNAs) with less comprehensive research objectives are deployed to quickly assess basic needs of affected population, which can then be complemented later by more in-depth assessments if relevant (CADRI Partnership, 2013). In recent years, collaborative efforts have also been made through an inter-agency partnership comprising of approximately twenty different humanitarian organisations to establish "*global standards for the estimation and analysis of humanitarian needs and protection risks*" through a Joint Inter-sectoral Analysis Framework (JIAF).[13]

Needs assessments and analyses have proven to be especially relevant to inform the strategic planning phase of the Humanitarian Programme Cycle (HPC), "*with needs analysis directly informing decisions about the response and monitoring, whether for the preparation of new plans or adjustments to existing ones*".[14] For instance, the Multi-Sector Needs Assessments (MSNAs) implemented by IMPACT's flagship humanitarian research initiative (REACH Initiative) across over twenty humanitarian crises over the years are comprehensive crisis-wide surveys which aims to produce household-level data about the needs, vulnerabilities, and priorities of affected populations across different geographical

[12] Read more here: https://emergency.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR Needs Assessment Handbook.pdf
[13] Read more here: https://www.jiaf.info/
[14] Read more here: https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/world/01-step-step-guide-humanitarian-programme-cycle-2023-may-2022

areas and demographic groups. Data from MSNAs are aimed at informing annual or multi-year humanitarian response plans through collaborative processes like the HPC, to ensure the delivery of needs-based and people-centred assistance to those most vulnerable. The relevance of MSNAs for joint inter-agency planning processes has also been acknowledged during an independent review conducted by the former Director-General of the European Union's Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) division in 2019.[15]

(b) Defining needs-based prioritisation for aid delivery

Another common application of social research methods by aid organisations is for beneficiary targeting i.e. **to understand how different individuals, households and communities are affected by conflicts and disasters, and which are the groups most in need for assistance and where.** One example of this is UNHCR's vulnerability screening tool which aims to identify and address situations of vulnerability in the context of migration, in order to help determine protection needs and inform decisions related to the most appropriate placement and support options, including early intervention, effective care of individuals in need, and partnerships with community services.[16] To inform response coordination for the Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan, UNHCR has also deployed tools like the Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF), which tries to provide data about refugee vulnerability to ensure common criteria are applied for planning aid interventions by all actors, thus strengthening coordination and decision-making around assistance provided.[17]

Similarly, the World Food Programme's vulnerability analysis and mapping (VAM) platform monitors and analyses data on food security, allowing users to visualize and download data about commodity prices and household food security across multiple crises.[18] The goal is to ensure the most efficient use of humanitarian resources by allocating funding according to needs, through geospatial, thematic and economic analysis, food security monitoring and post-shock assessments.

(c) Monitoring and evaluating effectiveness of aid interventions

The need to evaluate the impact of international aid and development projects has received considerable attention over the past few years, with a growing demand for evidence of the sustained positive changes and longer-term outcomes of such interventions. As a result, **impact evaluations are becoming an increasingly common application of research methods to inform humanitarian and development action**, as it ensures "the *rigorous and systematic collection of research data to assess the effectiveness of organizations, services and programmes*" (Bowling, 1997 in Learmonth, 2000). They are particularly well suited to answer important questions about whether interventions made a difference, and how cost-effective

[15] Read more here: https://www.impact-initiatives.org/what-we-do/news/ex-director-general-for-echo-claus-sorensen-conducts-independent-review-of-the-impact-of-2018-multi-sector-needs-assessments/
[16] Read more here: https://www.unhcr.org/media/unhcr-idc-vulnerability-screening-tool-identifying-and-addressing-vulnerability-tool-asylum
[17] Read more here: https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/understanding-vulnerability-can-maximize-aid-effectiveness/
[18] Read more here: https://dataviz.vam.wfp.org/about-us/wfp-vam

they were. Well-designed impact evaluations also shed light on why an intervention did or did not work; as Learmonth notes (2000), "*evaluations can identify useful effects and best practices, prompting questions that generate large scale research, assess impact, influence stakeholders' decisions*". Within the field of public policy research, a type of impact evaluation which has been particularly transformative in recent years are the randomised evaluation methods, or RCTs, pioneered by J-PAL. By comparing outcomes of interest between a "treatment" group (i.e. the ones receiving the intervention) and a "control" group (i.e. the ones that do not receive anything), RCTs enable researchers to "*obtain a rigorous and unbiased estimate of the causal impact of an intervention; in other words, what specific changes to participants' lives can be attributed to the program*".[19] If implemented well, impact evaluations can thus be an extremely powerful tool, providing policy-makers with a sound evidence base on the effectiveness and impact of different types of interventions to ensure that resources and public funding are allocated where they can have most impact.

Besides impact evaluations, mixed methods research approaches are also used to implement other project-based monitoring and evaluation exercises, such as Post-distribution Monitoring (PDM). For instance, in 2022, UNHCR analysed the outcomes from the PDM of its cash assistance programmes of over USD 950 million across more than 100 countries to understand whether cash assistance was still effective to address the needs and improve well-being of the beneficiaries of these programmes.[20] Similarly, in 2022, with support from IMPACT, UNHCR also conducted a PDM of the 2021-2022 winter cash assistance provided to refugee and internally displaced beneficiary households in Iraq, to gather evidence on how beneficiaries used the assistance provided, what impact this had (or not) on meeting winterisation needs, their perceptions of the process of receiving the assistance, as well as any non-compliance issues they may have faced during the process.[21]

3.3 Integration of emerging innovations in social research within the humanitarian and development sector: A few examples

(a) Digital data collection technologies

With the rapid advent of digital technologies in the last years, researchers in the humanitarian and development sector have also been quick to leverage these technologies to improve the coverage and efficiencies of data collection and analysis.

One such innovation which has been especially transformative in how (quantitative) data is being collected and processed in conflict and disaster contexts was the launch of the Kobo Toolbox platform in 2005. As a free and open-source software primarily designed for data collection in humanitarian crisis contexts, it enables researchers to gather

[19] Read more here: https://www.povertyactionlab.org/resource/introduction-randomized-evaluations
[20] Key findings from this analysis can be accessed here: https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/main-outcomes-of-cash-assistance-in-2022.pdf
[21] The full report from this PDM can be accessed here: https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-post-distribution-monitoring-pdm-unhcrs-2021-2022-winter-cash-assistance-refugee-and-idp-beneficiary-households-july-2022

data on-the-go with mobile devices like tablets or smartphones, which can be used offline as well, thus making it particularly suitable for remote areas with limited phone and internet access. Besides allowing for online and offline data collection from different devices, it offers safeguards against data loss and features for analysing data, by creating summaries, maps and other exports through a cloud server.[22] Today, it is widely used by most humanitarian organisations for their data collection initiatives, since it not only saves time and resources in data processing (especially when compared to the use of paper-based surveys), but also ensures better data quality by minimising data entry errors and enabling quick and collaborative access to incoming raw data for regular data checking. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, UNDP Nepal's Accelerator Lab and Crisis Bureau's SURGE Data Hub in Nepal jointly conducted a digital Socio-Economic Impact Assessment in the Gandaki Province, known for its ethnic diversity and livelihood opportunities. UNDP Nepal engaged almost 100 students in educational webinars on digital data collection and visualisation in crisis situations using KoboToolbox and Microsoft Power BI. The trainings aimed to mobilise and empower young volunteers and build capacity for future research activities. "*While conducting surveys after the 2015 Nepal Earthquake, I had to go to remote communities with a bag of surveys, notebooks and pens. With Kobo Toolbox, I can collect data digitally without using all that paper*," said Narayan Sharma, a participant at the training.[23]

Thanks to solutions provided by Kobo, as well as similar platforms like Microsoft Forms, Google Forms and Survey Monkey, **researchers today are also increasingly making use of internet-based data collection tools to gather data through self-administered online surveys from a wider range of crisis-affected populations.** According to Nayak and Narayan (2019), the technology and software for administering online surveys has also been progressively improving over the years and today anyone with internet connection and a mobile device can easily create, distribute or fill out a survey using several available platforms. For instance, in 2021, IMPACT collaborated with the International Labour Organization (ILO) to conduct a multi-country study on the impact of COVID-19 on Moroccan migrant workers living abroad, primarily in Europe, the United States, and Gulf region. Given the relatively large population of interest spread out across multiple countries, as well as limitations for in-person data collection methods due to wide geographical areas of interest, an online survey method was deployed with targeted advertising via Facebook to reach the population of interest. Nearly 2,000 individuals participated in the survey, providing valuable insights on the socio-economic impact of the pandemic to inform future programming decisions by ILO and its partners for this demographic group.[24]

Meanwhile, for qualitative research, an interesting innovation in data collection has been mobile ethnography, which enables researchers to observe recruited respondents who use smartphones to journal their everyday lives, behaviours, and feelings by using photos, videos or notes in relation to a particular research topic. An NGO called We World-GVC recently applied this approach, and specifically an innovative "*climate diaries*"

[22] Read more here: https://www.kobotoolbox.org/about-us/
[23] Read more here: https://www.undp.org/nepal/blog/data4development
[24] Full study report available upon request

methodology, for its 'Climate of Change' project. Over a four-week period, recruited participants in four case study countries (Guatemala, Senegal, Kenya and Cambodia) were asked to share photos and perceptions of the climate crisis through a WhatsApp group. In this way, researchers could easily visualize the impact on the lives and livelihoods of those on the front lines of the climate crisis.[25] This method thus allows to collect personal stories, co-constructed by participants themselves, to evidence the diversity of experiences and understandings of a specific topic.

(b) GIS and Remote Sensing applications

In recent years, GIS and Remote Sensing have demonstrated a lot of potential for applied social research across different areas of study. **By integrating spatial data with social and demographic information and enabling spatial analysis including the identification of spatial patterns and correlations for different phenomenon, researchers today can gain deeper insights into complex social and policy issues.** This type of research application is also proving increasingly useful to inform humanitarian and development action, especially when limited time and access makes implementation of traditional data collection methods more challenging. For instance, these methods can be used to identify areas with high poverty rates (e.g. through night-time light analysis), to analyse the spatial distribution of public services and related coverage gaps (e.g. healthcare facilities), to assess damage to shelters and other service facilities in the aftermath of a conflict of disaster, and to analyse hazard risk exposure and delineation of potential affected areas.

UNOSAT – the UN's Satellite Centre – has been one of the leading actors providing "*satellite image analysis during humanitarian emergencies related to disasters, complex emergencies and conflict situations*" since 2003.[26] This kind of analysis can be useful to inform all stages of a response cycle including preparedness and contingency planning (e.g. flood risk assessment), emergency response planning (e.g. precipitation analysis, flood extent mapping, damage assessments to estimate affected populations and areas), and early recovery (e.g. reconstruction monitoring). For example, in March 2024, UNOSAT conducted a building and housing unit damage assessment in Gaza to identify structures destroyed due to the recent escalation in conflict, assess the levels of damage, and identify the most affected governorates. Given limited accessibility to Gaza, and the difficulties to validate findings on-the-ground through traditional data collection methods, this kind of satellite imagery analysis is a valuable and unique source of information for aid actors trying to understand the humanitarian situation in Gaza. Similarly, Copernicus – the European Union's Earth observation programme, uses huge amounts of global data from satellites and ground, air and sea-based measurement systems to guide decision-making for service providers, public authorities and other international organisations.[27]

[25] Read more here: https://climateofchange.info/diaries/
[26] Find the full catalogue of UNOSAT analysis products here: https://unosat.org/products
[27] Read more here: https://www.copernicus.eu/en/use-cases

Another initiative that has become increasingly relevant in recent years is the 'Open mapping' global movement, especially the Open Street Map initiative, which has been creating free and open geographic data through an independent and crowdsourced project to understand the world through a growing community of workers. A leading actor in this area is Humanitarian OpenStreet Map (HOT), "*an international team dedicated to humanitarian action and community development through open mapping… which revolutionises disaster management, reduces risks, and contributes to achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals"*. For example, in Uganda which is the Centre of one of the world's largest and fastest growing refugee crises, HOT has been working towards the provision of standardised and accessible information to make timely, informed decisions about where services need to be planned and built. Through the application of open-source technical tools, a community-based methodology and the use of satellite imagery, HOT digitized 1,500,000 buildings and 36,000 km of roads, and mapped more than 4000 facilities and services across refugee communities and hosting districts. The project was thus able to increase "*real-time comprehensive data production on infrastructure and services where refugees and host communities reside. To ensure that government and organizations involved in the refugee response know that, first, this data exists and, second, how to effectively use it, HOT has worked extensively to support and train actors on how to systematically incorporate citizen-generated data into their programs to address and fill existing gaps*."[28]

Another interesting application of open geospatial data is by WorldPop, a research Centre at the University of Southampton which has been partnering with governments, UN agencies and donors since 2013 to produce 45,000 datasets that complement traditional population sources with dynamic, high-resolution data for mapping human population distributions. Specifically, WorldPop develops peer-reviewed research to produce open and high-resolution geospatial data on population distributions, demographics and dynamics, with a specific focus on low-and middle-income countries. The goal of this is to ensure that "*everyone, everywhere is counted in decision making*".[29]

Finally, for more than ten years now, IMPACT has also been leveraging geospatial analysis tools and satellite imagery analysis to inform decision-making in various conflict and natural hazard contexts. For example, IMPACT's team in Ukraine has implemented area-based risk assessments across several Oblasts since 2021, to develop risk profiles based on geospatial data about hazard exposure at a localised level. This kind of analysis provides a useful indication of which settlements to prioritise for mitigation measures, and how locally-led initiatives can be better supported to implement disaster risk reduction (DRR) efforts in areas of high concern.[30] Another example is from a damage assessment also conducted in Ukraine in 2024, to understand the extent of conflict-induced damage to non-residential and public service infrastructure in Kherson City and the surrounding areas. There are two unique elements of this application. Firstly, a mixed

[28] Read more here: https://www.hotosm.org/projects/bridging-data-gaps-mapping-refugee-contexts-in-east-africa/
[29] Read more here: https://www.worldpop.org/about/
[30] See an example report here: https://repository.impact-initiatives.org/document/repository/a058e1fe/IMPACT_UKR_Report_Mariuopol-ABRA_Aug2021.pdf

methods approach was used to compliment geo-spatial damage data with qualitative damage impact analysis to promote a detailed understanding of localised impacts, reflect the lived experience of affected populations, and facilitate the integration of community voices in the recovery process.[31] Secondly, IMPACT partnered with UA Damage – a Ukrainian data company - to produce an initial AI-assisted damage detection, results of which were verified through visual inspection, whereby each building was reviewed to confirm damage, determine its severity, and exclude non-residential structures. Overall, this assessment was aimed at supporting data-driven humanitarian and recovery programming, especially to inform early and long-term recovery efforts to ensure the population's access to housing, utilities, essential services and livelihoods.[32]

IMPACT's humanitarian research initiative – REACH - has also been applying GIS and Remote Sensing to inform decision-making around challenges associated with climate change. For example, a precipitation change analysis was conducted looking at data from 1981-2022 in Iraq, to inform WASH Cluster, partners, and other stakeholders about the challenges and potential solutions for the precipitation deficit in Iraq.[33] Similarly, in 2020 and 2021, the REACH team in Syria conducted flood hazard assessments in Dana and Maaret Tamsrin sub-districts using advanced modelling techniques such as the Hydrologic Engineering Centre's River Analysis System (HEC-RAS), and more specifically, a two dimensional (2D) direct precipitation model built using HEC-RAS. This method of 2D flood modelling, often referred to as a Rapid Flood Hazard Assessment (RFHA), can provide a high-level understanding of flood hazards on a catchment-wide scale and help identify flood-susceptible areas. The main goal was to help establish a shared understanding among implementing partners about the general flood situation for internally displaced populations in these areas, especially by trying to anticipate where a flood was most likely to occur, and which shelters located within the area are potentially at risk of being impacted by the flood.[34]

(c) AI-based solutions

Over the years, significant advances have been made in the field of Data Science resulting in the emergence of increasingly tangible applications across different sectors. Often used synonymously with Data Science, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a specific technique within this field which consists of "*software (and possibly also hardware) systems designed by humans… perceiving their environment through data acquisition, interpreting the collected data… processing the information, derived from this data and deciding the best action(s) to achieve the given goal.*"[35] AI has two main elements: 1) Knowledge-based systems i.e. computer programmes that use an existing knowledge base to solve problems, usually requiring

[31] The qualitative component was based on key informant interviews with representatives of local authorities and civil society organizations, as well as focus group discussions and participatory mapping with impacted residents.
[32] Final report available upon request
[33] Final report available here: https://repository.impact-initiatives.org/document/repository/38c85c3a/REACH_IRQ_Factsheet_Precipitation-and-Climate-Change-Analysis_07November2022.pdf
[34] Final report available here: https://repository.impact-initiatives.org/document/repository/63e491e1/REACH-Flood-Mitigation-Syria-Northwest-Operationalising-Flood-Hazard-Models_october2022-2.pdf
[35] European Commission (2020). *White Paper on Artificial Intelligence: A European Approach to Excellence and Trust.*

specialised human expertise; and 2) Machine learning systems i.e. algorithms that can be used to train machines to make sense of data, while improving their knowledge or performance with experience and past examples.

In recent years AI has gained increasing relevance across almost all industries, because of the amount and variety of open data being produced and the progress of computational power at unprecedented speed. The growing application of AI technology has the potential to make humanitarian action more rigorous and efficient and will play a transformative role in how evidence is being produced and used for decision-making in humanitarian contexts. Specifically, AI solutions can enable researchers to rapidly gather and analyse large volumes of information, while using machine learning and other techniques to identify patterns and correlations more easily within datasets, and develop predictive capacities based on historical data available. AI can also help with the automation of repetitive tasks (e.g. data cleaning, coding), thus giving researchers more time more time to focus on the more creative and analytical aspects of their work.

In the humanitarian sector, one of the actors pioneering the application of AI is the World Food Programme (WFP).[36] For example, in contexts like Ukraine, WFP makes use of chatbots to provide affected populations with quick and accurate information on assistance in response to local crises.[37] Meanwhile, the *Hunger Map LIVE* is a global hunger monitoring system which integrates multiple data sources, bringing together different streams of publicly available information on food security, nutrition, conflict, weather and a variety of macro-economic data – including from within WFP – all in one place to provide a holistic overview of the food security situation. To ensure comprehensive coverage and analysis, a part of this system includes a predictive model to "nowcast" food security situation in areas where this data is not easily available. The model is trained using historical food security data spanning 10+ years across many countries, and uses information about population density, nightlight intensity, rainfall, vegetation index, conflict, market prices, macroeconomic indicators, undernourishment, and past measurements of food security indicators. MEZA, an Optical Character Recognition system uses AI to digitize handwritten records, speeding up data collection and analysis processes and allowing decision makers make data-based decisions in a timely manner. A Voice-to-text AI phone survey tool was also deployed to overcome challenges with conducting face-to-face household nutrition surveys due to the COVID-19 restrictions. [38]

Other applications within the humanitarian sector include exploration of **Deep Learning and AI-assisted techniques by HOT,** in partnership with Microsoft's AI for Humanitarian Action initiative, to produce AI-detected open building datasets and map areas affected by disasters based on crowdsourced data from social media sources, as well as satellite and drone

[36] More details here: https://aiforgood.itu.int/about-ai-for-good/un-ai-actions/wfp/
[37] Read more here: https://www.wfp.org/stories/humanitarian-chatbot-how-tech-bridges-gap-between-people-and-assistance-they-need-ukraine
[38] Read more here: https://innovation.wfp.org/project/voice-text-ai#:~:text=Voice%20to%20Text%20AI%20offers,diet%20diversity%20in%20remote%20areas.&text=The%20COVID%2D19%20pandemic%20has,people%20based%20in%20remote%20areas.

imagery.[39] **UNHCR's Project Jetson platform** is a Machine Learning-based experiment that aims to provide predictions on the movement(s) of displaced people, by combining data science, statistical processes, design-thinking techniques, and qualitative research methods. By regularly feeding data and using trained models to predict forced displacement in contexts like Somalia, this experiment aims to understand the intrinsic interactions between climate change, violent conflict and forced displacement, to enable both UNCHR and other humanitarian organisations to become more proactive in their response.[40] **UNICEF is also currently working with private sector partners like Google and IBM to invest in a collaborative data sharing platform - '*Magic Box*' -** which will harness real-time data generated by the private sector to enable UNICEF and its partners to make more informed decisions about how to respond to disasters, epidemics and other global emergencies.[41] Finally, **Meta's *Data for Good* programme** has been working with several different organisations around the world to promote the usage of big data for more proactive response to humanitarian crises. For instance, using maps from this programme, UNICEF has built a series of tools to fill critical data gaps in the initial 72 hours after natural hazards.[42]

Data-driven AI technologies therefore have a lot of potential to transform humanitarian and development action in the coming years, including how research and evidence is being produced to inform decision-making. **However, any exploration of AI-based solutions needs to go hand-in-hand with continuous reflections on the ethical risks of deploying such solutions in crisis contexts.** For instance, by putting too much focus on technologically advanced solutions, there is a risk of over-simplifying complex societal problems and experiences. Secondly, attention should be paid to 'do no harm' risks by establishing processes for using and sharing sensitive data responsibly, and ensuring identified solutions can produce the most reliable conclusions, with no significant biases, errors or inaccuracies. AI systems can only be as good as the data they rely on and in crisis contexts where there is a scarcity of up-to-date, reliable data, there could be a high risk of arriving at inaccurate conclusions and ultimately mis-informing the response. Additionally, there is a risk of algorithmic biases built in due to the prejudices and opinions of the person(s) developing the model, which could further lead to unintended, but unfair, outcomes and discrimination for crisis-affected populations. Finally, most of the AI innovations till date, including the applications discussed above, have been developed within organisational siloes with limited efforts to make the knowledge and learning more widely accessible. This highlights an overall lack of transparency, as well as significant power imbalance when discussing the future of AI for humanitarian action.

(d) Crowdsourcing and Social Media Monitoring

As previously discussed, crowdsourcing is **an effective way to leverage a diversity of skills and perspectives to understand and resolve different issues.** It offers an alternative to traditional data collection methods such as time-intensive surveys, or costly direct

[39] Read more here: https://www.hotosm.org/projects/ai-assisted-humanitarian-mapping/
[40] Read more here: https://jetson.unhcr.org/
[41] Read more here: https://www.unicef.org/innovation/Magicbox
[42] Read more here: https://dataforgood.facebook.com/dfg/resources/Leveraging-AI-and-big-data-to-better-respond-to-crises

observation captured in the field. Within the humanitarian sector, crowdsourcing was used, for example, by Premise in 2023 to assess the political, social, and economic landscape of Myanmar, with a focus on community involvement in the pro-democracy movement.[43] Premise also used crowdsourcing to conduct an audience analysis in Tunisia, to measure the effectiveness of a COVID-19 Awareness campaign conducted in 2020.[44] The American Red Cross is also using crowdsourcing to map vulnerable communities around the world; with volunteers mapping areas of the world that are prone to disasters and crisis, aid organizations are able to have the information required to reach people most in need.[45] While crowdsourcing clearly is an efficient way to collect data in real time from a big and diverse sample, ethical questions have risen about its application, especially around incentives provided for information contributors (especially considering crowdsourcing is often relying on volunteers, who are not paid at all), as well as on the quality and validity of data collected (Xia, 2020).

One of the most prevalent applications of crowdsourcing is social media monitoring i.e. using tools and techniques to gather data from social media channels to understand public sentiment, identify trends, and gain insights into how a topic is being discussed. It can help produce sentiment analysis i.e. a piece of text to measure how positive or negative that text is and collect data on the perceptions revolving around a specific topic. For example, in 2014, UNICEF implemented a multi-country study to track and analyse online conversations related to immunization on social media and mainstream media in India, Kenya, Nigeria, and Pakistan. Using methods sentiment analysis, topic classification and network analysis on commonly used platforms like Twitter and Facebook, researchers analysed content relating to vaccination over a period of twelve months, along with mainstream media. Findings were then used to support public health workers and communication campaigns.[46] Similarly, the IDETECT tool developed by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) uses Natural Language Processing to assess the spatial and temporal dimensions of disaster-related displacement. The tool automatically detects, extracts and analyses openly available information (e.g. world news, UN and NGO reports, social media) for real-time monitoring of internal displacement trends around the world.[47]

(e) Innovative analysis approaches

Beyond data collection, a lot of innovative approaches have also emerged in recent years to produce more nuanced, meaningful analysis and insights for decision-makers. One note-worthy example is the previously mentioned Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) developed by OPHI and UNDP, which uses the Alkerie-Foster method to provide a comprehensive tool to measure poverty and wellbeing across 110 countries by examining

[43] Final report available here: https://premise.com/case-studies/crowdsourcing-insights-to-understand-the-impact-of-myanmar-crisis/
[44] Read more here: https://premise.com/case-studies/measuring-the-effectiveness-of-a-covid-19-awareness-campaign-in-tunisia/
[45] Read more here: https://www.redcross.org/about-us/our-work/international-services/mapping-vulnerable-communities.html
[46] Read more here: https://www.unglobalpulse.org/document/understanding-immunisation-awareness-and-sentiment-with-social-media/
[47] Read more here: https://www.internal-displacement.org/monitoring-tools/monitoring-platform/

data across three dimensions of poverty- health, education, and living standards. A series of indicators across these three dimensions contribute towards the calculation of a deprivation score, and anyone whose score is 33.33% or above is identified as multidimensionally poor. The tool can thus help decision-makers understand how prevalent poverty is around the world, and provide insights into the lives of the poor, their deprivations and the severity of those deprivations; this can then help accelerate efforts to end poverty in all its forms.[48]

The INFORM indices developed by a multi-stakeholder forum including the European Commission's Joint Research Centre offers "*quantitative analysis to aid in managing humanitarian crises and disasters*" across three different areas: 1) generalised risk analysis of a crisis based on structural conditions, 2) analysis of the severity of an existing crisis, and 3) analysis of projected changes to a structural crisis, including risks as a result of climate change.[49] Taken together, these three products can help inform decisions at different stages of the disaster management cycle, specifically climate adaptation and disaster prevention, preparedness and response.

A more qualitative analytical innovation is FEWSNET, which analyses, monitors and forecasts acute food insecurity across different crises around the world.[50] FEWSNET was developed in 1985 in response to a series of concerning famine occurrences in Africa at the time, which highlighted the need for an earlier and more efficient warning system to predict food security crises for future response planning efforts. By monitoring latest available data across several factors, such as climate, conflicts, agricultural production, markets and trade fluctuation, as well as nutrition indicators, FEWSNET analysts develop scenarios based on "if-then" statements. So far, FEWSNET has used the scenario development, for example, to assess the impact of drought in Somalia, to project impact of flooding in Nigeria and to understand the effects of coffee rust on labour dependent households in Central America. Today, FEWSNET can reportedly forecast food insecurities 6 to 12 months in advance, thus providing timely evidence for early warning and preparatory action.

Finally, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) is a collaborative effort by global food security actors aimed at enhancing the analysis and decision-making related to food security and nutrition interventions in humanitarian crises.[51] By utilizing the IPC's classification system and analytical methods, governments, UN agencies, NGOs, civil society, and other relevant stakeholders work together to assess the severity and extent of acute and chronic food insecurity, as well as acute malnutrition, within a country, following internationally recognized scientific standards. The IPC was originally developed in 2004 to be used in Somalia by FAO's Food Security and Nutrition Analysis Unit (FSNAU). IPC analysis is thus designed to enable comprehensive, evidence-based, and consensus-driven analysis of food insecurity and acute malnutrition, which can support both emergency response efforts and the development of medium and long-term policies and programmes.

[48] Read more here: https://ophi.org.uk/global-mpi
[49] Read more here: https://drmkc.jrc.ec.europa.eu/inform-index
[50] Read more here: https://fews.net/
[51] Read more here: https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/ipc-overview-and-classification-system/en/

4. Translating Research into Policy: Challenges and Best Practices

Over the years, social scientists increasingly find themselves being asked about the impact of their research on policy outcomes, and how research-generated insights are being used to produce more effective and relevant policies.[52] This discourse is based on an underlying assumption that there is now both a demand, i.e. policymakers have the incentives and the capacity to access and use research, and a supply, i.e. relevant research is being effectively communicated to policymakers (Cairney et al, 2020). However, effectively translating research into policy is not easy and there are several challenges that need to be overcome to successfully achieve this. Nevertheless, over the years, several best practices and success stories have emerged across fields and organizations, that can help navigate some of these challenges and enable more informed decision-making based on research and evidence. This chapter will discuss some of these challenges and best practices in more detail.

3.1 Challenges to translate research into policy

First and foremost, **research-policy links are shaped largely by the political context within which the research is being conducted**. In addition to political and bureaucratic pressures that researchers must navigate, in humanitarian and development contexts, local history and power dynamics, as well as attitudes and incentives among local authorities, can also prove to be additionally challenging (ODI, 2004). A direct result of this could be that even if research is being heard, the policy itself can be adapted, developed and distorted during implementation (Crewe & Young, 2002). At an organisational level, buy-in from leadership (or the lack thereof) can also prove to be challenging; new ideas and insights can be easily discarded if they elicit disapproval from senior leadership (ODI, 2004).

In addition to these contextual pressures, **a study conducted by Oliver et al. in 2014 on barriers to the use of evidence by policy makers found that the five most common barriers were: availability and access to research; clarity, relevance and reliability of research findings; timing and opportunity; research skills and capacities of policymakers; and associated costs to develop and/ or adapt policies based on the research.** All the above barriers are arguably inter-connected (Oliver et al, 2014). For instance, if researchers communicate and collaborate with policymakers from the start of the research project, a shared understanding of clear, relevant and reliable research can be established, to guide the researchers' objectives and methods accordingly. Similarly, if research is designed to be relevant, and findings are properly disseminated, there is increased possibility of uptake and use. To this end, there has been increased investment over the years to develop tools and resources aimed at helping decision-makers navigate research evidence easily, such as Cochrane-produced evidence summaries.[53]

[52] See also: *What is the relationship between research and policy?* (March 2017). SAGE Research Methods Community.
[53] Read more here: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/28329023

A final set of challenges are linked to budgeting and scarcity of resources (Crewe & Young, 2002). For instance, a highly competitive environment for public research funding often discourages collaboration between researchers, thus disrupting efforts at bringing together different studies for the most relevant policy outcomes. Status and perceived relevance of research projects also tends to be influenced by the size and source of the budget funding the project, thus making it more challenging for smaller scale researchers to reach their intended audiences. Finally, due to resource shortages for the design and implementation of policies, there can be a risk of over-simplification i.e. under-interpretation and/ or distortion of research findings by policymakers to gloss over the complexity of identified problems and proposed solutions.

3.2 Facilitators to promote use of evidence by policymakers

While studying the barriers to the use of evidence as discussed above, Oliver et al. (2014) also looked at the facilitators of evidence use by policymakers. Their study found that the most common facilitators to promote uptake and usage of evidence were better dissemination practices for increased availability and access to research; additional efforts to ensure clarity, relevance, and reliability of research findings; and collaboration and established relationships between researchers and policymakers.

The importance of effective dissemination as a key facilitator for evidence use, both in terms of how messages are communicated and by whom, is further highlighted in other literature available on this topic. If research is to inform policy decisions, findings need to be delivered in a digestible and timely manner. Proper packaging and communication of research findings is especially important to convince policymakers when the existing status quo needs to be reconsidered (ODI, 2004). However, it is also important to remember that successful dissemination strategies do not follow a linear, one-way communication approach, and effectively packaging new messages and communicating solutions-oriented results is an intensive and interactive process. For instance, the Decision Lab is an applied research firm using behavioural science to promote better dissemination practices for scientific thinking, and ultimately reduce the gap between research and application. Additionally, successful uptake of evidence is also largely driven by who is communicating the message, since information is more likely to be accepted if it comes from someone who policymakers trust and recognise to be a holder of a certain knowledge base (ODI, 2004). The literature also reiterates the importance of adapting communicating tools and strategies based on the type of audience researchers are trying to reach.

Another key enabler to facilitate the uptake of research in policymaking is effective collaboration, relationship-building and establishing networks with all relevant stakeholders. In addition to establishing relations with policymakers, researchers also need to develop meaningful networks and "chains of legitimacy" with other actors relevant for policy areas, including media, advocacy organisations, local community representatives, etc. (Crewe & Young, 2002). Moreover, by demonstrating a wider representation and building

legitimacy chains to their research participants, researchers are more likely to be heard as well (Crewe & Young, 2002).

Finally, successfully facilitating uptake in policy decisions also requires researchers to properly understand the political context of policymaking, including possible external influences linked to socio-economic and cultural factors (Crewe & Young, 2002). This will help ensure that dissemination approaches take these relevant factors into account, and potential barriers linked to the process and context of policymaking are adequately anticipated, with mitigation strategies developed beforehand.

Looking at a combination of all these factors, in 2004, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) published a framework to better guide researchers on what they need to know, what they need to do, and how to do it, to effectively influence policymaking. This is summarised in the table below.

Table 1: A framework on "How to influence policy and practice" (ODI, 2004)

What researchers need to know	What researchers need to do	How to do it
Political Context: • Who are the policymakers? • Is there policymaker demand for new ideas? • What are the sources / strengths of resistance? • What is the policymaking process? • What are the opportunities and timing for input into formal processes?	• Get to know the policymakers, their agendas and their constraints. • Identify potential supporters and opponents. • Keep an eye on the horizon and prepare for opportunities in regular policy processes. • Look out for – and react to – unexpected policy windows.	• Work with the policymakers. • Seek commissions. • Line up research programmes with high-profile policy events. • Reserve resources to be able to move quickly to respond to policy windows. • Allow sufficient time and resources.
Evidence: • What is the current theory? • What are the prevailing narratives? • How divergent is the new evidence? • What sort of evidence will convince policymakers?	• Establish credibility over the long term. • Provide practical solutions to problems. • Establish legitimacy. • Build a convincing case and present clear policy options. • Package new ideas in familiar theory or narratives. • Communicate effectively.	• Build up programmes of high-quality work. • Action-research and Pilot projects to demonstrate benefits of new approaches. • Use participatory approaches to help with legitimacy and implementation. • Clear strategy for communication from the start. • Face-to-face communication.
Links: • Who are the key stakeholders? • What links and networks exist between them? • Who are the intermediaries, and do they have influence? • Whose side are they on?	• Get to know the other stakeholders. • Establish a presence in existing networks. • Build coalitions with like-minded stakeholders. • Build new policy networks.	• Partnerships between researchers, policymakers and policy end-users. • Identify key networkers and salesmen. • Use informal contacts.
External Influences: • Who are main international actors in the policy process? • What influence do they have? • What are their aid priorities? • What are their research priorities and mechanisms? • What are the policies of the donors funding the research?	• Get to know the donors, their priorities and constraints. • Identify potential supporters, key individuals and networks. • Establish credibility. • Keep an eye on donor policy and look out for policy windows.	• Develop extensive background on donor policies. • Orient communications to suit donor priorities and language. • Cooperate with donors and seek commissions. • Contact (regularly) key individuals.

3.3 Best practices and success stories

Building on the facilitators and enabling factors discussed above, this section will look at some past examples of research exercises which translated some of these into best practices, thus enabling the successful uptake of research for effective policy decisions.

(a) Effective and accessible communication of research findings

A first example of impactful communications to enable policy change at the organisational level is from 2017, when Christine Fernandez, Save the Children's (STC) global Humanitarian Nutrition Adviser for Infant and Young Children Feeding in Emergencies (IYCF-E), successfully convinced STC's senior leadership team to launch nutrition support interventions in Iraq.[54] At a time when STC was reviewing its country strategy for the coming year, Christine delivered a 20-minute presentation questioning the audience about what they thought to be the most effective means of preventing deaths in children under five, and then proceeded to correct popular misperceptions with hard data. This example thus demonstrates that keeping presentations concise and targeted, correcting your audience's misconceptions with evidence, can be an effective way for influencing people's opinions. As a direct result of this presentation, the country leadership team launched an IYCF-E programme start-up in Baghdad and supported the Federal Ministry of Health on the national nutrition strategy focusing on breast milk substitute monitoring and capacity building as an area of investment for 2018.

Another example of digestible and timely communication is from a USAID-funded study by the 3ie Initiative (International Initiative for Impact Evaluation).[55] To support USAID's efforts to promote the design and implementation of flexible, evidence-based, and data-driven Rule of Law (ROL) programmes, USAID's Centre for Democracy, Human Rights and Governance commissioned 3ie to develop an Evidence Gap Map (EGM) to inform its decision-making. The objective of the EGM was to provide a snapshot of more than 700 studies on the effectiveness of ROL interventions worldwide. By mapping out 118 systematic reviews and 654 impact evaluations, the EGM covered a comprehensive set of interventions that have been implemented across multiple geographies and plotted the evidence base for their effects on outcomes of ROL and justice interventions, with a specific focus on reducing and preventing crime. **In terms of how this study contributed to policymaking, in 2023, USAID cited this 3ie EGM Report as the Agency's first-of-its-kind initiative to inform its rule of law and justice programme design and decisions.**[56,57] Additionally, the intervention and outcomes framework of the EGM reportedly informed the design of a USAID-funded $38-million indefinite delivery/indefinite quantity project on the prevention of violence and irregular migration in Honduras. **One of the key factors that contributed to**

[54] Read more here: https://humanitarianstudies.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Research-Evidence_a-Practice-Guide.pdf
[55] See also: *Strengthening rule of law and justice programming at USAID* (October 2023). International Initiative for Impact Evaluation.
[56] See also: *Strengthening rule of law and justice programming at USAID* (October 2023). International Initiative for Impact Evaluation.
[57] See also: Sonnenfeld, A., et al. (2023). *Rule of Law and Justice: an evidence gap map*. https://doi.org/10.23846/egm019

the successful uptake and use of the EGM was the strong communications and advocacy role played by USAID's Centre for Democracy, Human Rights and Governance; the team prioritized the active engagement of key users throughout the EGM development process and took proactive measures to raise awareness through events, newsletters, and emails.[58]

(b) Integrating local knowledge for more relevant policy outcomes

In 2019, IMPACT Initiatives (REACH), in partnership with the Africa Voices Foundation, jointly implemented an innovative communication approach to engage local communities and produce more relevant insights for the planning of humanitarian interventions in Somalia. As part of the research exercise, Africa Voices Foundation consulted local communities via interactive radio programmes about findings from a recent household survey implemented by the REACH team across Somalia. In a two-week period, more than 8,000 people engaged directly with the programme, expressing their feedback on the survey findings in their own words, thus helping not only to verify the findings but also to directly inform the design of the humanitarian response in Somalia.[59]

Similarly, over the last five years humanitarian actors in the Central African Republic (CAR) have been implementing community feedback mechanisms (CFMs) to enable communities to seek information, as well as share opinions and feedback on the humanitarian response. Coordinated by the Working Group for Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP), different organisations also piloted new approaches to coordinate CFMs through digital platforms, and ensured referral mechanisms were in place to forward feedback to the relevant organisation. In 2022, WFP also piloted a mobile version of the digital platform to increase outreach among remote and marginalised groups which reportedly resulted in a 78 per cent response rate (close to 7,500 complaints and feedback collected) by 2023. Despite this, people did not feel heard and an MSNA conducted in 2023 found that only 27 percent of aid recipients knew how to submit complaints or feedback to aid providers, while only 24 percent of those who submitted a complaint through CFMs reportedly received a response. To address this challenge, strengthen collective action to incoming information, and ensure that people's feedback is being heard and acted upon, **OCHA's Centre for Humanitarian Data collaborated with the AAP Working Group in CAR to develop a standard operating procedure (SOP) for a new, common response-wide CFM.** Formally rolled out in March 2024, more than 50 organisations are currently participating in this, a third of which include local NGOs. By creating a shared language, establishing classifications for different types of information, and articulating clear guidelines and timelines for response, the SOPs will help ensure that information from CFMs can be used to inform response-wide decision making.[60] Additionally, due to backing and support from senior-level decision makers, these

[58] See also: 3ie. 2023. *Strengthening rule of law and justice programming at USAID.* Online summary. Evidence Impact Summaries. New Delhi: International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie). Available at: https://doi.org/10.23846/EGM019.
[59] See also: UN-OCHA, *Amplifying community voices in humanitarian action in Somalia* (2019)
[60] Read more here: https://Center.humdata.org/from-feedback-to-action-in-the-central-african-republic/

SOPs for a response-wide CFM will hopefully enable more collective knowledge sharing and ensure a genuine feedback loop is maintained between people in crisis and aid providers.

In 2021 and 2022, IMPACT's AGORA Initiative also worked on the RELSUDE project funded by the European Union to support local recovery planning in the Southeast region of CAR. As part of this project, the AGORA team, in collaboration with local authorities and humanitarian organisations, developed local recovery plans based on findings from area-based research exercises in 21 targeted localities, to help identify gaps and solutions for improving access to basic services, economic activities, and stronger local governance structures. **AGORA's approach involves understanding local contexts and dynamics through territorial diagnosis, followed by collaborative planning workshops with community members, local authorities, and NGOs, to identify priorities and solutions for local recovery.** According to the researchers who worked on this project, the involvement of multiple stakeholders ensured a shared understanding of recovery needs and effective coordination of response efforts. In the context of CAR specifically, this approach was able to strengthen local coordination structures and enhance the capacity of local authorities to participate in humanitarian responses by linking existing coordination mechanisms with aid actors to ensure efficient implementation and accountability.[61]

Similarly, the 3ie initiative together with Brody et al. (2015) conducted a systemic review of evidence available on the effectiveness of economic self-help group (SHG) programmes to promote women's empowerment in low and middle-income countries. The study synthesized results from 23 quantitative and 11 qualitative studies conducted between 1980 and 2014, especially highlighting perspectives from women participating in SHGs, to determine how effective these have been for women's economic, social and political empowerment in different contexts.[62] **Findings from this review, especially how SHGs can empower women in rural areas, were cited in the Indian government's Economic Survey 2023,** which is intended to inform annual budget planning by the central government. **The review also informed the Bill & Melinda Gates' Foundation's Global Framework for Advancing Women's Empowerment and 2017 Empowerment Model, which guide the foundation's activities and investments as part of its gender equality strategy.** This has since reportedly led the Foundation to establish and support the interdisciplinary Evidence Consortium for Women's Groups, led by the American Institutes of Research and Population Council, and includes several other academic and research institutions whose learning agenda draws from the review, in addition to other resources.

(c) Collaborative approaches and stakeholder engagement

To promote uptake of their research among policymakers, and also ensure policymakers have the required skills and capacities to integrate evidence-based decision-making within their work, the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL)

[61] All resources from this research project can be accessed online here
[62] Read more here: https://www.3ieimpact.org/evidence-hub/Evidence-impact-summaries/advancing-evidence-informed-action-empower-women

runs regular courses and workshops on how to design and implement rigorous impact evaluations for social programmes and humanitarian interventions. For example, their course on 'Evaluating Social Programmes' is designed for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers (from NGOs, governments, international organizations, private sector companies, and foundations) to implement rigorous evaluations to inform evidence-based policies and maximise policy impact. Additionally, J-PAL also runs evaluation design workshops called 'Research Incubators' tailored to the interests of humanitarian organisations that intend to explore randomised evaluations as a complement to their existing evaluation and learning toolkits. Besides the design of an evaluation that is relevant to their work, the workshop is also designed to better equip practitioners to make informed choices about evaluation options that are suited to their programmes and the specificities of humanitarian interventions. Initiatives like these also help to establish links and peer-to-peer learning networks among practitioners working on similar interventions, thus further promoting evidence-based policy decisions across different sectors and contexts.

Similarly, the ReBUILD Research Programme Consortium, an international research partnership funded by the UK government, works closely with health policymakers across different conflict contexts. The Consortium aims to ensure the evidence they have generated on health system resilience in fragile settings, and experiences of communities and health workers through conflict and post-conflict periods, can be used to inform interventions for strengthening health systems during and after a crisis. Some of the successes till date include informing decision-making and implementation in Sierra Leone during the Ebola outbreak and supporting aspects of a donor's support plan for Syria (Blanchet & Clarke, 2018). Although it is challenging to integrate long-term evidence within approaches of humanitarian organisations that are focused on immediate-term emergency response planning, ReBUILD is collaborating with different organisations (e.g. Evidence Aid) and networks (e.g. UHC2030 Working Group on Fragile Settings and the Health Systems Global Thematic Working Group on Health Systems in Fragile and Conflict Affected States) to strengthen the humanitarian-development interface for public health interventions, and ultimately promote more evidence-based humanitarian action across conflict contexts.

Directly working with practitioners to promote the use of research and evidence in rapidly evolving crisis contexts is also enabled by the Humanitarian Situation Monitoring (HSM) exercise implemented by IMPACT's REACH Initiative, monthly across more than ten contexts. As noted by Maxwell et al. in a 2021 publication on 'Real-Time Monitoring in Humanitarian Crises',[63] "*In dynamic and evolving crises, humanitarian actors require access to a consistent flow of up-to-date information that can highlight populations and areas in the most need—especially in places that are the hardest to access. REACH conducts HSM in a number of such contexts, where logistical difficulties, high levels of insecurity, or the need to cover large geographic areas presents significant challenges to directly collecting household data. It is therefore not unusual for REACH HSM data to be the only information source available to decision-makers in such places […].*" To ensure the

[63] Available online here: https://fic.tufts.edu/wp-content/uploads/Seeing-in-the-Dark_3-24.pdf

translation of data into practice, REACH HSM teams work with decision-making forums within each context (e.g. Assessment Working Groups or Inter-cluster Coordination Groups), as well as through bilateral advocacy channels with donors and high-level stakeholders, to ensure timely responses, especially in the event of a significant shock (Maxwell et al., 2021). For example, in 2021, a series of attacks were carried out by non-state armed groups on Dikwa town, Nigeria, which triggered humanitarian actors' evacuation in an area heavily dependent on life-saving assistance for food, water and healthcare. A rapid HSM exercise was conducted by REACH to provide donors, programmatic decision-makers and analysis groups with in-depth information on the evolving humanitarian needs in and outside of Dikwa town, including the population movement routes reportedly being used. By conducting this rapid research exercise of a highly insecure area in a timely and effective manner, humanitarian actors were able to have the required evidence to respond to the mass displacement crisis, and elevated risk of famine, in Dikwa.

In addition to direct engagement with policymakers, successful translation of research into policy also requires different actors to minimise duplication and instead put their efforts together to achieve the same outcomes. For example, the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC)[64] and International Organisation for Migration (IOM)[65] conducted a joint study to understand the experiences of drought-affected Ethiopians and Somalis who have moved internally within the borders of their country of origin. By trying to understand the full range of drought-impacted mobility patterns in the Horn of Africa, partners working on the Migrant Response Plan for the Horn of Africa (2021-2024) were thus provided with an in-depth evidence base to design and deliver contextually relevant programmes and advocate for policies which are responsive to the impacts of climate change and support safe, humane, and orderly migration.[66]

Finally, collaborative research efforts have also resulted in positive policy outcomes in the field of Cash Transfer Programming (CTP) in humanitarian contexts. In recent years, CTP has emerged as one of the most significant innovations in international humanitarian assistance. In 2022, $7.9 billion of humanitarian assistance was disbursed through cash and vouchers, which represented 20% of total international humanitarian assistance provided.[67] Cash disbursement has not only grown in total terms, but also as a relative share of total international humanitarian assistance, from 7.8% in 2015 and 10.3% in 2016, to 20% in 2022. **This expansion has been informed by a growing number of evaluations, resulting in a body of evidence on the effects of different programmes on individual and household-level outcomes.[68]** Such research efforts have also helped to understand and address concerns around cash transfers, such as corruption and insecurity, and increase awareness

[64] The Mixed Migration Center (MMC) is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs hosted in the Danish Refugee Council's (DRC) regional offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

[65] The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society.

[66] Read more here: https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/102972

[67] Read more here: https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2023/executive-summary/

[68] Read more here: https://humanitarianstudies.ch/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Research-Evidence_a-Practice-Guide.pdf

that cash generates different, but not necessarily greater, risks than in-kind assistance. The benefits of CTP have been shown to cut across multiple sectors from issues like women's empowerment, food security, education and health care. As a result, CTP is now an accepted tool in almost every emergency humanitarian response, and **one of the key successes of CTP research is that the generated evidence has been widely used to promote the use of cash in humanitarian crises.** For example, the CaLP Network, brings together many implementing organisations (currently a network of 90+ organisations) to promote better, and more people-centred, usage of cash and voucher assistance (CVA) across multiple crises. The network also coordinates and consolidates research efforts to continuously promote learning and knowledge for improved approaches to CTP; recent examples include research on CVA practices with Afro-descendant and Indigenous Communities in the Americas, and an analysis of lessons learned from anticipatory CVA in the Asia-Pacific region.[69] At the same time, the network also publishes resources and guidelines to help network members better plan and design CVA interventions; for instance, in May 2024, the network published a resource on Minimum Standard for Market Analysis, which is aimed at supporting high quality market analysis in order to contribute to improving implementation of CTP.[70]

[69] More detailed overview of ongoing research efforts within the CaLP network is available on their website here: https://www.calpnetwork.org/resources/ongoing-research/

[70] All resources from the CaLP network are available on their website here: https://www.calpnetwork.org/resources/

5. Conclusion

As discussed through the course of this paper, **the field of social research has gone through transformative changes in recent decades,** both due to advancements in science and technology, as well as wider shifts in societal dynamics. Key aspects of this evolution include digital transformation and the emergence of new technologies; innovations in data collection and analysis methodologies; globalisation and its impact both on the research process, as well as on topics of investigation; emergence of interdisciplinary approaches; and increasing public engagement in social sciences. **Additionally, there has been heightened sensitivity to the obligation of conducting social research more responsibly,** specifically when it comes to concerns of data privacy and wider ethical regulations related to conflicts of interest, ensuring respect for the autonomy and privacy of research participants, and ensuring a fairer distribution of research benefits (and burdens) across populations.

Applied social research has also found increasing relevance for humanitarian and development action in recent years, providing crucial insights that can guide interventions, policies, and resource allocation decisions across different contexts of crisis. In dynamic and resource-constrained contexts affected by conflict or natural hazards, applied social research offers a unique opportunity to inform more effective, efficient and accountable delivery of aid to crisis-affected communities. **Over the years, research applications have proven especially valuable to produce three kinds of evidence for decision-making in crisis contexts:** 1) assessing needs among crisis-affected communities; 2) identifying those most affected and vulnerable to define needs-based prioritisation for aid delivery; 3) monitoring and evaluating aid delivery programmes to determine effectiveness of different aid interventions. **These applications have been further enhanced by the integration of emerging innovations,** including transformative digital technologies like Kobo Toolbox; the use of GIS and Remote Sensing applications to better understand social phenomenon through spatial patterns and correlations; the use of AI-based solutions to improve efficiencies in data production and the quality of analysis produced for decision-makers; the use of crowdsourcing and big data sources to gather real-time information from a more a diverse sample; and finally, the emergence of innovative analytical approaches to provide critical evidence-based insights for decision-making both within and across crises. However, most of these innovations have been undertaken within organisational siloes, and wider sharing of knowledge and learning from these innovative approaches appears to be limited.

Meanwhile, although bridging the gap between research and practice remains challenging, **several best practices and success stories have also emerged over the years that can help navigate some of these challenges and enhance the impact of research on decision-making.** Some identified best practices include effective and accessible communication of research findings; integrating local knowledge for more relevant policy outcomes; and effective collaboration and relationship-building between researchers, policymakers and other key stakeholders (e.g. media, research participants, etc.).

In conclusion, there are four key take-aways for any actors who want to promote more effective, evidence-based decision-making in humanitarian or development contexts:

- **Firstly, collaboration and partnerships are key, both between researchers and policymakers, as well as amongst researchers themselves.** Better relationships between researchers and policymakers can contribute towards ensuring more effective translation of research into policy, especially if policymakers are engaged as early as possible (e.g. during research design) to define shared objectives and expectations. Policymakers should then also be engaged through the different research stages, and proactively supported to enable effective use and uptake of research outputs during dissemination. Meanwhile, better collaboration between researchers will minimise duplicative efforts, maximise potential for policy impact by combining outputs from similar (and complimentary) research exercises, and promote shared knowledge and learning on the integration of emerging innovations to improve research practices across the sector. Till date, while several innovations have been tested and applied by different actors in various contexts, there has been no consistent effort to ensure wider knowledge sharing on key failures and successes. Having a centralised platform like UN Global Pulse where all learning can be proactively and transparently shared to enable collective innovation efforts, both by independent researchers as well as research actors across different organisations and contexts (UN, NGOs, academic research centres, etc.), could be a good first step.
- **Secondly, a shared priority for all researchers working in these contexts should be not only the production of relevant and rigorous evidence, but also collective efforts to ensure research is effectively translated into action for communities affected by crises.** With significant investments made towards research efforts in the last years, a wealth of knowledge has been produced on the challenges and lived experiences of populations affected by crises, and there is still a lot of information being regularly collected and analysed in more efficient ways day-by-day. However, there is limited evidence that this knowledge has necessarily translated to better decision-making in contexts of crisis. Dissemination practices therefore need to be strengthened by all research actors working in these contexts, building on some of the best practices and success stories discussed earlier in this paper. Better networks also need to be built with different stakeholders on the ground, including local actors and affected communities. Finally, research findings need to be made easier and more user-friendly to access for policymakers, by using formats that are simpler, clearer, and as concise as possible.
- **Thirdly, researchers also need to strengthen collective efforts to better measure and evaluate the impact of research on policymaking in humanitarian and development contexts.** This includes continuous collaboration with policymakers (instead of one-off meetings) to monitor and gather feedback on how research findings are being used, whether findings were relevant and valid, and when/ if further research is needed. As Oliver et al. (2014) rightly note, "*Without empirical data exploring access to information and perceived impact, and without investigating the policy process, or testing current theories about knowledge utilization, it is hard to draw useful conclusions*". In recent years, IMPACT has been testing different approaches to improve its internal Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework to better

understand the outcomes of research produced by IMPACT teams across different contexts, which includes trying to understand the access to research products by targeted end-users, as well as uptake and reported usage by humanitarian decision-makers. In the coming year, these efforts will be continued to further strengthen this framework and share learnings more widely across IMPACT's partner networks as well. Similar efforts are also being made within academia; for instance, the EPPI-Centre within the Social Research Unit at the University College of London conducts systematic reviews to produce evidence "*supporting mobilisation of research knowledge so that it can be used to make a positive, meaningful and equitable difference to people's lives*". The International Development Research Centre within the Canadian government also developed a 'Research Quality Plus' methodology in 2018, as a way to better evaluate the "*broader impact of research on society – its practicality and utility in the 'real world*'".[71] Such efforts are crucial to understand how and why (or why not) evidence is being used to inform decision-making.

- Finally, although this literature review was a good starting point, **there are still some knowledge gaps which requires further research, to establish a more holistic understanding of the state of applied social research in complex crisis contexts.** First and foremost, a comprehensive mapping is needed of different research actors (across academia, NGOs, UN agencies, etc.) working in similar contexts and their individual areas of interest, to identify shared interests and future avenues for collaboration. Additionally, for some of the innovations discussed within this paper, further research is needed to better understand the key successes and failures of each one (what works, what does not work, and why), so that lessons learned can be applied for the responsible upscale of similar applications in the future. Finally, further research is also needed to unpack in more detail best practices for communicating research to policymakers, as well as on evaluating the outcomes of research on decision-making processes, to help overcome commonly faced in ensuring effective translation of evidence into action for populations on the ground.

[71] Read more here: https://idrc-crdi.ca/en/stories/research-quality-plus-holistic-approach-evaluating-research

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