

# Navigating Constraints to Implementing Impact Evaluations in Humanitarian Settings

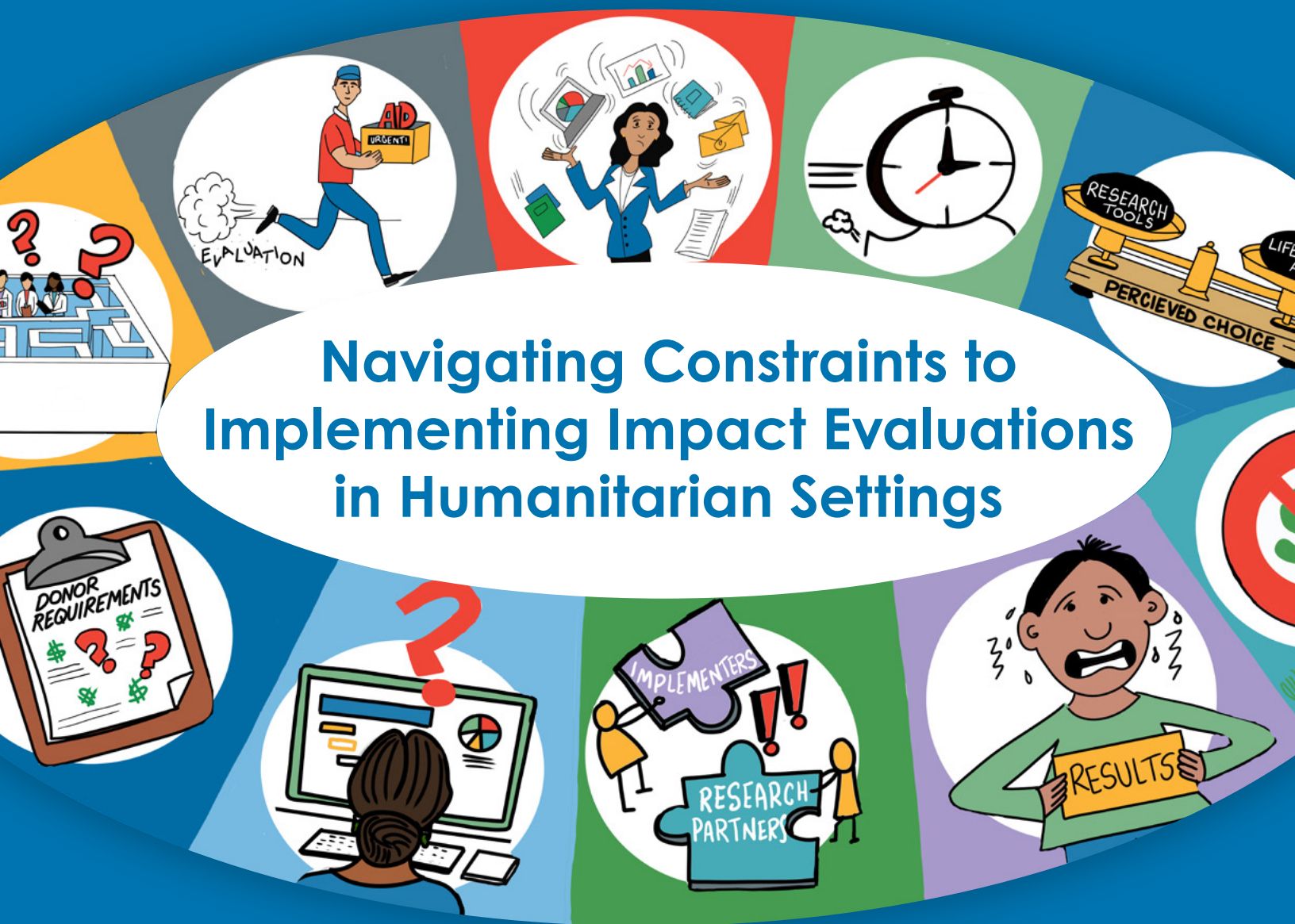


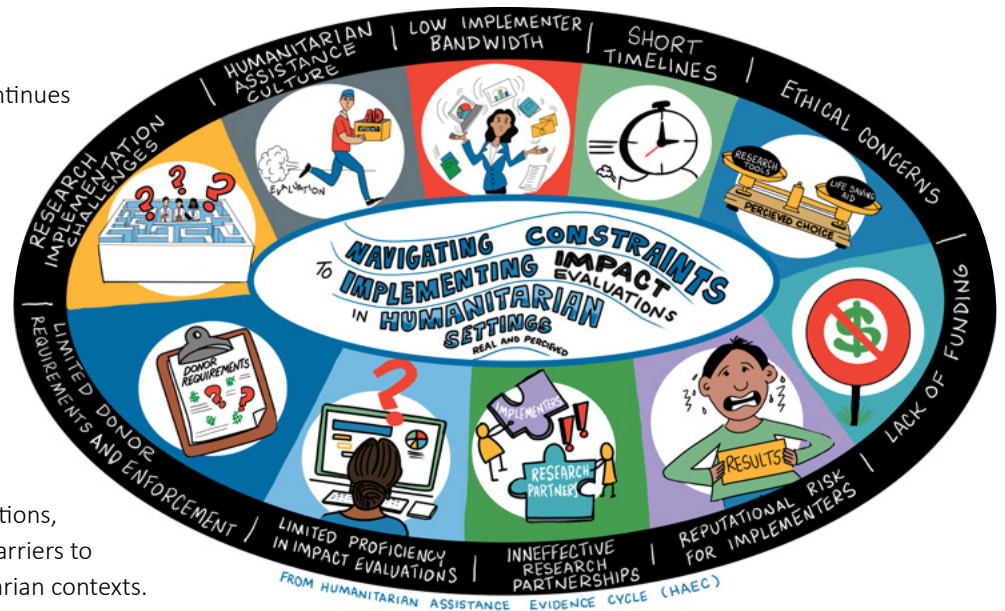
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# Executive Summary

As the need for humanitarian response continues to increase, so too does the importance of rigorous, high-quality evidence to inform its funding. The [Humanitarian Assistance Evidence Cycle](#) (HAEC) Associate Award works to increase the utilization of cost-effective and timely impact evaluations of emergency food security activities funded by United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA).

To increase the utilization of impact evaluations, HAEC first worked to understand the key barriers to conducting impact evaluations in humanitarian contexts.

To do so, the team conducted 68 consultations with implementers, funders, and researchers and identified the following ten primary constraints:



- 1. Limited donor requirements and enforcement:** Donors rarely request or expect impact evaluations, and when they do, the requirements are often poorly understood or enforced.
- 2. Reputational risks for implementers:** Limited donor requirements for impact evaluations lead implementers to question their value, prioritizing minimizing risks to their reputation and funding, and often viewing conducting impact evaluations as burdensome rather than learning opportunities.
- 3. Lack of funding:** There are not widely available or advertised funding sources to undertake impact evaluations within humanitarian programming.
- 4. Limited proficiency in impact evaluations:** There are wide-ranging misconceptions across both implementers and funders on what sets an impact evaluation apart from other evaluations, and how they can be used to generate learnings rather than as an accountability device.
- 5. Humanitarian assistance culture:** There is a mindset within humanitarian assistance that prioritizes swift service delivery in emergency contexts and perceives innate importance of aid, viewing research and evaluation as potential obstacles that could complicate and delay life-saving assistance.
- 6. Low implementer bandwidth:** Implementers are highly bandwidth constrained due to the overwhelming nature of emergency response work, making it challenging to accommodate additional requests, including those for impact evaluations, which require coordination and data sharing efforts.
- 7. Ineffective research partnerships:** Research partnerships do not always produce valuable learnings for implementers due to misaligned priorities on research questions and limited entry points for implementer-focused researchers to engage.
- 8. Short timelines:** The short duration and rapid start-up of most humanitarian activities pose significant challenges for impact evaluations as stakeholders question how to execute a compelling study design and set up research within the limited timeframe.
- 9. Research implementation challenges:** Humanitarian contexts pose additional challenges for research given insecurity, limited access to areas, and population movement.
- 10. Ethical concerns:** Research with extremely vulnerable populations raises ethical concerns for stakeholders including concerns around diverting financial resources away from aid, withholding programming to form control groups, and additional survey burden.

## Introduction

Around the world, conflict, crisis, and disasters threaten the lives, rights, and security of millions. In 2022, [OCHA estimated](#) that 274 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance and protection, an increase of 39 million compared to the previous year. [Demand is expected to rise](#) as climate change exacerbates the frequency and severity of extreme weather events and instances of violent conflict remain high. By 2030, 46% of the world's poor are [expected to live in fragile or conflict-affected areas](#). International donors spend approximately [\\$30 billion on humanitarian assistance](#) and emergencies each year. [OCHA estimated](#) that it would require \$41 billion to reach only 67% of those in need in 2022. Current funding for humanitarian response struggles to keep up with this expanding need. ALNAP's [State of the Humanitarian System Report](#) highlights that between 40-50% of UN-coordinated appeals, which are the humanitarian system's best collective estimate of needs and costs, were unmet in the last decade. In 2021, this represented approximately \$18 billion.

This growing need and limited funding underscore the critical need to optimize existing humanitarian programming, ensuring it is as impactful and cost-effective as possible. However, there is an absence of rigorous, high-quality evidence to inform funding from bi-lateral, multi-lateral, and foundation donors. A [study commissioned by USAID in 2013](#) found that only 3% of the evaluations were impact evaluations. In 2017, a [Government Accountability Office \(GAO\) report](#) noted that, while the number of impact evaluations is increasing, they still make up fewer than 20% of USAID evaluations. This limited evidence base is markedly worse in the humanitarian sector. HAEC's [Evidence Gap Map](#) identified that since 2000, there have been 163 impact evaluations on emergency food security activities, which pales in comparison to the existing impact evaluation evidence base within other development sectors (e.g., 1,605 in the agricultural sector and 1,132 in education). While impact evaluations are certainly not necessary in every scenario, this contrast in existing evidence highlights an opportunity to further learn and optimize humanitarian programming.

The Humanitarian Assistance Evidence Cycle (HAEC) Associate Award works to address this problem by increasing the utilization of cost-effective and timely impact evaluations of emergency food security activities funded by USAID/BHA. This report presents the findings from 68 consultations with implementers, funders, and researchers conducted between May and November 2022, with a focus on the constraints that hinder the use of impact evaluations in humanitarian contexts. The objective of the HAEC consultation process was to develop a deeper insight into the question: *Why are more impact evaluations not being conducted in humanitarian settings?*

This report analysis unpacks the specific constraints to impact evaluations and associated lessons to guide implementing partners and donors in their efforts to strengthen the evidence base for funding, strategic, and operational decisions by promoting impact evaluations in humanitarian settings. Each finding outlines how stakeholders in the humanitarian sector can navigate these constraints using different applications of impact evaluations, research designs, or partnership approaches. Donors, implementing partners, and research partners can utilize the report's suggestions on how to navigate the constraints to enhance their utilization of impact evaluations as learning tools.

HAEC is generating credible evidence that implementers and researchers can utilize to inform the design and implementation of effective humanitarian assistance programs. HAEC does this by funding six impact evaluations for USAID/BHA-funded activities. In conjunction with funding the impact evaluation research initiatives, HAEC facilitates knowledge dissemination and capacity-strengthening initiatives. HAEC actively disseminates research findings, lessons learned, and best practices within the humanitarian community, including aid agencies, governments, and non-governmental organizations. HAEC hosts capacity-strengthening opportunities to train humanitarian professionals in the core principles of impact evaluation with the goal of implementing partner and donor colleagues deepening their understanding of when and where to apply impact evaluations and how to be more informed users of impact evaluation findings and results.

### What is an impact evaluation?

[Impact evaluations](#) are a systematic assessment approach used to determine the causal relationship between an intervention or program and the observed changes or outcomes within a specific population. Impact evaluations seek to answer the fundamental question: *"What would have happened differently if the intervention had not been implemented?"* Impact evaluations are a tool to understand program design effectiveness and inform operational decisions, in terms of outcomes met and cost-effectiveness. Findings from impact evaluations allow staff to make data-driven programming decisions, provide evidence for replication and scaling, and influence broader policy. Over the past two decades, impact evaluations have been applied widely to improve program effectiveness, test innovative interventions, and guide program replication and adaptations. However, while impact evaluations have become an established tool in development, this tool has not yet extended widely within the humanitarian sector.

# Key Constraints to Impact Evaluations in Humanitarian Settings

## Limited Donor Requirements and Enforcement



### Constraint Findings

Donors rarely request or expect impact evaluations, and when they do, the mandates are often poorly understood by both implementers and donors or poorly enforced by donors. For example, USAID's Operational Policy outlines when impact evaluations are required: "Each Mission and Washington [Operating Unit] must conduct an impact evaluation, if feasible, of any new, untested approach that is anticipated to be expanded in scale or scope through U.S. Government foreign assistance or other funding sources (i.e., a pilot intervention)" [Automated Directives System (ADS) 201.3.6.5]. However, as confirmed by one

USAID/BHA respondent, there is no formal evaluability assessment process to determine

whether impact evaluations are feasible. This underscores the lack of clarity highlighted by research

partner respondents on how USAID determines when an impact evaluation is necessary. Funders and implementers alike highlighted that donors are not pushing for impact evaluations in the humanitarian sector. Implementers typically prioritize donor requests and consequently lack financial incentives or opportunities for new business development to incorporate impact evaluation research into proposals or new awards without these requirements.

HAEC's consultations identified two drivers of limited requirements and enforcement. One key reason is that while donor staff may be familiar with the term impact evaluation, many do not fully understand what it is and the questions it can answer relative to other evaluation methods (see Limited Impact Evaluation Proficiency), which diminishes impact evaluations perceived value. As one USAID/BHA staff highlighted, "There is this pre-conceived notion that they are not useful...USAID/BHA needs to understand what an impact evaluation is and when it can be really useful." A second reason is that poor results pose risks for donors (as well as implementing partners). Consultations with USAID/BHA staff highlighted that when findings indicate that interventions have no impact, there is a risk to the credibility of broader program strategies. As one implementer outlined "Why don't donors want it? If you start reporting the impact on giving funds and it doesn't look good; your appropriation is at risk. Better to stick with something concrete – we gave this food out and it was good."

*"If in the solicitation it said, 'you'll be forced to work with an [impact evaluation] evaluator,' then there wouldn't be this kind of resistance from [implementers]."*

Where donor mandates have been enforced, they have been effective at creating uptake. In the limited examples of successful impact evaluations in humanitarian contexts, HAEC identified that an external push from donors or other stakeholders was a key enabling factor. Some impact evaluations were driven by a strong academic interest or mandates from donors or governments, particularly in cases where there was a recognized evidence gap or a need to inform a project's scaling. For others, donors required impact evaluations for impact assessment purposes – and this was sometimes the sole motivation for implementers to commission impact evaluations. Respondents generally agreed that while implementer buy-in was useful for improved research collaboration, if a donor required an impact evaluation, then implementers would comply. One researcher said that the pathway to more successful impact evaluations is more donors changing the incentive structures of the political economy, "If in the solicitation it said, 'you'll be forced to work with an [impact evaluation] evaluator,' then there wouldn't be this kind of resistance from [implementers]."



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Conor Ashleigh / Save the Children

## HAEC's Response to Navigating the Constraint

Without awareness or enforcement of donor requirements, there is no impetus for impact evaluations of humanitarian programming. Clearer and stricter enforcement of impact evaluation requirements is a key mechanism for increasing uptake, given their immense potential to influence implementers. However, significant socialization around these requirements, both internally to donors and externally to implementers, is needed to effectively enforce them. First, education around what questions impact evaluations can answer that other evaluation methods cannot is needed. Second, there needs to be a shift in the culture of understanding around the purpose of an impact evaluation as a learning tool for optimization and adaptation of programming, versus an accountability metric for an implementer's performance, to increase the interest for this method across the sector.

HAEC believes that through effective socialization, requirements can become the norm, as one researcher compared routine impact evaluations to routine handwashing for surgeons, *"At first it seemed like a distraction from helping people immediately, but with a norm reset through hygiene requirements, medical treatment is more effective."* To this end, HAEC works to socialize what impact evaluations can answer relative to other methods, as well as the value of impact evaluations as a learning tool, rather than solely an accountability metric. To do this, HAEC produces awareness raising videos, webinars, meetings/workshops, briefs, trainings, and disseminates relevant case studies in the humanitarian sector.

## Reputational Risks for Implementers



### Constraint Findings

Limited enforcement of impact evaluation requirements creates perceived risks for implementers. When impact evaluations are not required by funders, implementers question the value of conducting such evaluations, considering the resource burden of reporting and monitoring requirements as well as the perceived risk of poor results. Implementers prioritize minimizing risks to their reputation and future funding, which outweigh the perceived learning benefits of impact evaluations. As one implementer described, *"Evaluations are risky to implementers. Why would they open themselves up to that risk? What is the return? Implementers do the minimum requirements for donors."*

This fear exists because often implementers and donors perceive impact evaluations as an accountability device for their performance, rather than an opportunity for learning and optimizing. As donors fear poor results will undermine their program strategy, implementers also worry that their approach – or the efficacy of the approach's implementation – will be questioned and consequently put their future funding at risk. As one funder respondent explained, *"Implementers question, 'will [impact evaluation results] call into question my authority and [the programming] we've done in the past.'"*

In the limited examples of impact evaluations that overcame this constraint, HAEC observed that the presence of a "champion" among senior management at implementing organizations was a key enabling factor. These individuals drove the process of commissioning and implementing impact evaluations given their role in promoting valuable learning. So, while implementer buy-in is not critical, having an implementer champion at senior levels can effectively advocate for an impact evaluation. Champions were often individuals who had M&E expertise, either through a previous degree or through applied experience, and appreciated the value of learnings impact evaluations generate.

*"Evaluations are risky to implementers. Why would they open themselves up to that risk? What is the return? Implementers do the minimum requirements for donors."*

## HAEC's Response to Navigating the Constraint

Overcoming this constraint necessitates reducing the perceived risk and socializing impact evaluations as a tool for learning. Primarily, implementers fear that if an impact evaluation indicates the program had 'no impact,' it will jeopardize their reputation and future funding opportunities. To extinguish this, there needs to be a shift in understanding around the purpose of impact evaluations. Specifically, impact evaluations should be viewed as an opportunity to generate learning and evaluate the efficacy

of a donor’s strategy, including how to optimize interventions to best achieve this strategy, rather than hold implementers accountable for the implementation of that strategy. While implementer accountability is important, there are other evaluations methodologies designed specifically for the purpose of assessing fidelity of program implementation, such as a process evaluation.

To socialize the learning value of impact evaluations, HAEC publishes case studies of implementers using impact evaluations findings to improve their programming and secure additional funding. As articulated by one implementer, “[*impact evaluations are*] a good way to raise profile, contribute to global discussions, and it looks good to donors.” These case studies allow implementers to build their brand identity as an evidence-driven organization to donors and the broader community. Additionally, HAEC publishes learning materials, such as videos, and hosts webinars, meetings, and workshops with implementers, particularly Chiefs of Party and program staff, new business development teams, technical leads, and donor award managers to strengthen the capacity of the humanitarian sector to view impact evaluations as a tool for learning. Through these training opportunities, HAEC emphasizes that there are different ways to carry out impact evaluations in order to promote learning. For example, HAEC champions the use of A|B testing (i.e., comparing two versions of an intervention to determine which one performs better). By promoting a variety of evaluation designs, HAEC emphasizes that impact evaluations are not inherently accountability tools and can be leveraged to inform and enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian programs.

## Lack of Funding



### Constraint Findings

Some stakeholders – implementers, funders, and researchers alike – commented that there are not widely available or advertised funding sources for impact evaluations within humanitarian programming. One implementer underscored this challenge, “[*Impact evaluations*] are just not often required by donors. There’s no funding for it. So, this raises the question of who’s going to pay for it?”

However, USAID/BHA respondents pointed out that there is funding for impact evaluations in the humanitarian sector available, given appropriate evidence needs. In particular, USAID/BHA emergency M&E guidance states:

*“BHA may support an impact evaluation, especially when the applicant provides a sufficient justification for the impact evaluation filling a critical evidence gap. The applicant must also document that they have sufficiently considered and addressed the logistical and ethical considerations that come with conducting an impact evaluation in a humanitarian context. The objective of an impact evaluation of a humanitarian assistance activity should be to fill gaps in evidence that will lead to more effective and efficient humanitarian responses. Where possible, the evaluations should attempt to answer practical implementation questions about comparative cost-efficiency of different interventions or approaches.”*

*“Money [is a barrier] - it’s real but it’s not the big barrier that people think.”*

Moreover, the existence of impact evaluations of humanitarian programming – albeit not as many as other sectors – suggests that there is funding available and that implementers and researchers have found ways to circumvent this constraint. One researcher highlighted, “*Money [is a barrier] - it’s real but it’s not the big barrier that people think.”*



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## HAEC's Response to Navigating the Constraint

Given the existence of funding sources and evidence of implementers successfully navigating this challenge, HAEC determined that the *perception* of a lack of funding is the constraint, rather than a true limited availability of funds. Contributing to this perception is the fact that there are limited funding sources solely designated for impact evaluations of humanitarian programming. For example, implementers applying for funds from USAID/BHA must include funds for impact evaluations in the same budget as their programming funds. For many implementers, this acts as a deterrent, as they aim to be as cost competitive as possible, and therefore do not want to include a non-required impact evaluation.

One mechanism for reducing this perceived risk is increasing the funding pools that are solely designated for impact evaluations, such as HAEC. In 2022, HAEC released a Request for Application with the aim of awarding six impact evaluations in the humanitarian sector, specifically for BHA-funded awards in the food and nutrition security sector. Despite the targeted audience, limited timeframe, and narrow distribution of this opportunity, HAEC received 27 applications directly from implementers. This suggests that making funding available is a promising approach for increasing uptake. Available funding will increase demand given it alleviates a financial constraint and signals that impact evaluations are desired by donors. More donor requirements around impact evaluations will also reduce this constraint as it removes the perception that it makes applications less cost competitive. Finally, as implementing partners observe improvements in the cost effectiveness and quality of humanitarian assistance programming because of well-designed and utilized impact evaluations, this constraint will continue to diminish.



### Limited Impact Evaluation Proficiency

#### Constraint Findings

HAEC observed wide-ranging misconceptions around [what an impact evaluation is](#) and how it is different from other learning tools. These misconceptions were observed with both implementer and donor respondents. Researchers further underscored that this lack of understanding is a widespread problem in the sector, *“We can’t underestimate ignorance – people don’t understand impact evaluations. We have evaluators who are not trained in doing rigorous evaluation methods. Ninety-five percent of “evaluation experts” are not really evaluation experts.”*

Primarily, respondents incorrectly differentiated impact evaluations from other tools based on the types of outcomes that are measured, regardless of the methodology. Impact evaluations were commonly assumed to look at long-term “general impact” in contrast to other evaluations looking at outputs or short-term outcomes. Some examples of how this was described include *“an [impact evaluation] is an assessment of whether or not an overall investment was successful or not in the long term”* and *“It’s about the length of the evaluation – you want to see the bigger picture of sustainable change.”*

HAEC observed a conflation between impact evaluations and outcome evaluations, a commonly used approach for a performance evaluation (PE) of USAID activities, which measures changes in outcomes through a baseline and endline comparison. Performance evaluations that incorporate an outcome evaluation approach are used regularly to evaluate humanitarian programming.

However, USAID guidance is clear on the limitations of performance evaluations: *“Since performance evaluations do not contain a rigorously defined counterfactual, they should not answer questions about the amount of change attributable to an intervention, where other factors are likely to have influenced the variable in question”* [ADS 201.3.6.4]) and their preference for impact evaluations to answer causal questions (*“When USAID needs information on whether an intervention is achieving a specific outcome, the Agency prefers impact evaluations over performance evaluations”* [ADS 201.3.6.4]).

Despite this, baseline to endline change measured in outcome evaluations is often incorrectly interpreted causally and classified as program impact. Moreover, for implementers who understood what impact evaluations are, they commented that they did not

*“We can’t underestimate ignorance – people don’t understand impact evaluations. We have evaluators who are not trained in doing rigorous evaluation methods. Ninety-five percent of “evaluation experts” are not really evaluation experts.”*

possess the required skills to independently conduct one. Specifically, they knew that a rigorous comparison group is needed for answering causal questions but acknowledged that they were not equipped with the econometric skills to implement that design or analyze the data. One implementer described this skill set gap, *“Its methods and analysis – I only [have] basic statistics skills. If we needed to do for example Instrumental Variables or Regression Discontinuity Design, I wouldn’t be able to do that. We could say it would be interesting to do this approach but couldn’t actually implement.”*

## HAEC’s Response to Navigating the Constraint

Limited impact evaluation proficiency affects the uptake of impact evaluations through two different mechanisms. Most directly, this limits the ability for implementers to conduct their own internal impact research as they do not have staff that can conduct the requisite econometric analysis.

Perhaps more pervasively this lack of understanding of different evaluation tools diminishes the demand for impact evaluations since there is not a clear understanding of what impact evaluation methods offer over and above other evaluation types. Specifically, there is a misconception that pre-post analysis commonly used in performance evaluations can generate equally rigorous estimates of impact as experimental or quasi-experimental methods. This is not true and does not align with USAID’s evaluation policy. This points to a critical need to better educate stakeholders on the different questions evaluation tools can answer and the level of rigor they can offer.

To address these misconceptions, HAEC is developing short videos on what implementers can learn from impact evaluations (relative to the traditional pre-post analysis conducted as part of a performance evaluation). These videos will be disseminated across a wide audience including implementers and funders from the humanitarian context.

Additionally, HAEC is developing in-person and online curriculum to strengthen implementers’ capacity and knowledge of impact evaluation approaches, enabling them to understand when an impact evaluation – and the specific methodology – would be most appropriate. HAEC’s trainings will also strengthen implementer capacity to coordinate with research partners, and better consume the results and evidence from impact evaluations.

Additionally, HAEC offers rapid evaluability assessments of BHA-funded humanitarian activities to identify if activities’ learning objectives are suitable for impact evaluation methods and approaches. Assessing the compatibility between the activities and impact evaluation methods, HAEC helps implementing partners align their needs with the specific context and goals of their activity. These rapid assessments also evaluate whether the implementing partner is “evaluation ready,” in other words, whether an impact evaluation is the right tool for their learning questions and can be feasibly implemented and whether the right stakeholders and resources are in place to carry it out. Through these assessments, HAEC strives to foster evidence-based decision-making and enhance the overall impact of BHA-funded activities.



Photo credit:  
Conor Ashleigh / Save the Children



## Humanitarian Assistance Culture



### Constraint Findings

Many implementers and funders in the humanitarian sector perceive conducting impact evaluations as a misallocation of valuable resources in a sector that prioritizes the swift delivery of services. Research and evaluation are frequently considered potential obstacles that could complicate and delay life-saving assistance, rather than support it. One respondent illustrated this when they said, “Ambulance drivers don’t go into the [hospital] to ask if people lived or died. It’s the same mentality – super fast, get work done.”

Additionally, there is a broad acceptance that humanitarian assistance programming does not need to be further optimized because it is clearly beneficial. As one respondent noted,

*“Humanitarian workers get more leeway. You know we are doing good work, let’s just move on with it! Don’t question whether interventions work – just do it.”*

While researchers acknowledge this is a belief held by implementers, one speculated that there could be a mentality shift as impact evaluations are more normalized, comparing it to the medical industry, “[There is the belief that] our work is too crisis oriented to do it, and that goes hand and glove with this unethical thing. But if that was true, we wouldn’t do drug trials. It’s going to take a while to educate people about norms. It took a while even in medicine.”

### HAEC’s Response to Navigating the Constraint

HAEC works to normalize impact evaluations and contribute to the shift away from the ingrained beliefs on impact evaluations as a hindrance to delivering aid swiftly. As outlined above, a primary mechanism to do that is through stricter enforcement of donor requirements. Enforcement of requirements would signal to implementers that donors, and therefore the public, expect these.

A second mechanism is shifting implementer understanding on uses of impact evaluations. As mentioned above, there is a belief that impact evaluations are a tool to hold implementers accountable. However, HAEC works to shift the framing to highlight how impact evaluations can be used to optimize intervention effectiveness (e.g., how to target better, which approaches are most cost effective to achieve similar outcome,s or identifying the optimal timing for delivering assistance). In doing so, HAEC demonstrates that impact evaluations are not about holding implementers accountable, but rather generating learning to have a greater impact within the humanitarian sector. To this end, HAEC is funding six impact evaluations, none of which focus on accountability, but rather on operational research questions to improve future iterations of humanitarian assistance.

Finally, it is important to note that humanitarian programs already engage in various forms of evaluations, albeit primarily focused on measuring outputs rather than addressing causal questions. Therefore, rather than requiring an increase in the number of evaluations or additional allocation of resources to conduct impact evaluations, HAEC promotes shifting resources to alternative evaluation methods that effectively address causal inquiries. To do this, HAEC emphasizes cost transparency to equip implementing partners with knowledge on impact evaluation costs compared to other evaluation methods that are currently used, but not able to answer causal questions.

*“Humanitarian workers get more leeway. You know we are doing good work, let’s just move on with it! Don’t question whether interventions work – just do it.”*



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Shehan Obeysekera/  
FOLD Media / Save the Children

## Low Implementer Bandwidth



### Constraint Findings

In humanitarian settings, implementers are highly bandwidth constrained. Implementers, funders, and researchers alike expressed this severe constraint, *“On emergency side, most of us are just so overwhelmed”*, *“People are habitually running around with their hair on fire”*, *“Everyone is understaffed. And people work around the clock”*, *“There is a culture of crisis”*, *“People are so desperate to get things done.”* This environment means that it is difficult to add additional requests. Even seemingly small requests, such as requesting data or time for a short meeting, are challenging for implementer staff. Thus, the coordination required for an impact evaluation (e.g., working with research partners, giving input into research design, sharing required data) can be overwhelming.

HAEC observed several examples of implementers successfully navigating this challenge who were able to manage their own research in-house, thus successfully delivering aid and managing research. These implementers had robust, centralized research units that coordinated research and were able to minimize research demands on their field teams. Other implementers without centralized research units cited examples of strong M&E leadership within awards playing a similar liaison role between an external research partner and field staff. These individuals managed research coordination while minimizing requests on field staff, allowing field staff to focus on the important work of delivering assistance.

*“On emergency side, most of us are just so overwhelmed.”*

### HAEC’s Response to Navigating the Constraint

A successful impact evaluation in the humanitarian space must minimize requests to the implementation team. While this can be managed through a centralized research unit, that is not the only model to overcome this constraint. As HAEC observed, individual M&E staff can play this liaison role, however, not all M&E staff have the necessary skills, experience, or understanding of what impact evaluations are (see [Limited Impact Evaluation Proficiency](#)). There remains a need to invest in strengthening this capacity within existing M&E staff. Donors increasing the demand for impact evaluations, through more effective requirement enforcement, could incentivize implementers to strengthen this internal capacity.

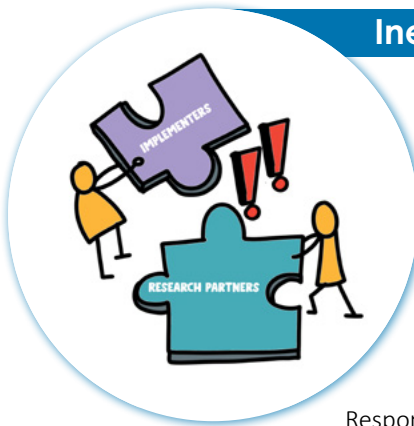
Additionally, HAEC is developing and offering in-person and online trainings to strengthen implementer staff capacity to coordinate and better consume evidence from impact evaluations, so that they can more effectively liaise between field staff and research partners. The training curriculum is tailored specifically towards implementers and equips implementers with an understanding of impact evaluation design, data requirements, and guidance on how to plan and coordinate the process. HAEC is also creating template evaluation survey tools and consent forms. These standardized tools will not only streamline the data collection process but can improve consistency across impact evaluation studies, enhancing the quality and comparability of results. By providing readily available templates, HAEC aims to reduce the bandwidth constraints and further support implementers to conduct impact evaluations to generate evidence from their initiatives.

*“People are habitually running around with their hair on fire.”*



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Conor Ashleigh / Save the Children

## Ineffective Research Partnerships



### Constraint Findings

Some implementers with prior experience in impact evaluations reported challenging research partnerships. Of these, some found study reports overly academic and difficult to comprehend or did not see how the study results could be applied to their programming.

As one implementer aptly put it, *“Giving an emergency programmer an 85-page anything is useless. I want a two-to-five-page summary of here is what we found and what it means for you. I don’t need to know what the methodology was.”*

*“On emergency side, most of us are just so overwhelmed”*

Respondents also acknowledged the existence of perceived inequities in researcher-implementer dynamics. For example, respondents cited incidents of quantitative findings overshadowing implementing staff’s contextual knowledge, which led to recommendations that did not align with the context.

Respondents also reported tension between the desire for public generation of knowledge (e.g., publishing reports) and the need for private generation of knowledge specific to the implementer and context. The focus on public generation of knowledge may supersede generation of findings that are most relevant for implementers. Implementers generally prioritize highly specified research questions that inform their programmatic decisions. This tension is most often the case when publication for the research partner is a major consideration, as implementer-driven research is not the most direct path towards peer-reviewed publications. This misalignment of priorities can lead to discord, discouraging future attempts at partnership between researchers and implementers.

HAEC observed that many implementers who had been part of an impact evaluation had worked with academics. Equally, the only researchers that HAEC spoke with who had experience conducting humanitarian impact evaluations were academics. The procurement mechanisms can be set up in ways that deter private sector partners from engaging or limit entry points into the market, driving this dynamic. For example, grants or cooperative agreements are typically unattractive to private sector partners because they prohibit generating a profit. As one private sector partner stated, *“The biggest barrier is that there isn’t much access. We’re unable to break into and get onto these projects with USAID. We have the technical capacity and interest. We’d love to, but there aren’t many entry points.”*

Both implementers and researchers noted several qualities that enabled successful research partnerships. Implementers identified key soft-skills or researchers to drive successful partnerships, specifically, humility, empathy, curiosity, cultural sensitivity, and appreciation of ethical considerations with regards to evaluation design. Respondents also routinely underscored the need to remain flexible with methodologies, such as utilizing quasi-experimental methods, and not expect academically rigorous projects. Further, there is a nascent demand by implementers that researchers be good project planners with the ability to adapt quickly if things go awry. One researcher put it well, *“you need someone who doesn’t panic when something goes wrong, especially in the [humanitarian assistance] space. Be a good planner but a better problem-solver.”*

*“You need someone who doesn’t panic when something goes wrong, especially in the [humanitarian assistance] space. Be a good planner but a better problem-solver.”*

Researchers also noted the necessity of being able to navigate the tension of needing input from implementers while implementers have limited bandwidth (see Low Implementer Bandwidth section).

### HAEC’s Response to Navigating the Constraint

HAEC believes that teams can circumvent many of these research partnership challenges by targeting researchers that focus on implementer-driven research, such as private sector partners. However, implementers might not be aware of the full spectrum of available research partners they can work with. To encourage these partnerships, there is a need to better educate implementers on the diversity of alternative research partner models and for funding mechanisms to encourage non-academic research partners to join the market. In particular, funding opportunities often come in the form of grants and cooperative agreements, which

deter private sector partners from engaging given the unattractive nature of these contracting mechanisms to private sector researchers. Contracts mitigate the risk of operating in challenging humanitarian contexts for the researcher, so a shift to this type of procurement mechanism could encourage more buy-in.

HAEC is facilitating research partnerships between implementers and researchers focused on implementer-driven research to generate learning around promising practices for effective partnerships. Additionally, HAEC places a strong emphasis on producing knowledge products that are accessible and user-friendly, ensuring that impact evaluation insights are readily available to a broad audience. By prioritizing user-friendliness, HAEC aims to facilitate learning and knowledge exchange among humanitarian actors, researchers, and implementing partners. Through clear and engaging content, HAEC maximizes the impact of its findings, promoting evidence-based decision-making and fostering a culture of continuous learning within the humanitarian assistance sector.



## Short Timelines

### Constraint Findings

Humanitarian awards are typically 12- to 24-months and can involve a rapid start up. This presents two key challenges for impact evaluations. First, implementers and funders question how a compelling study design can be executed within this time window given that it may take longer for certain outcomes to manifest. The second aspect of the short timeline constraint, which is a barrier acknowledged across all stakeholder types, is the short runway leading up to implementation given the urgency around initiating programming – specifically in rapid onset emergencies. The fast-paced nature of humanitarian contexts constrains research preparation. As one researcher aptly put, *“Humanitarian response and impact evaluations have conflicting priorities. In emergency response, there is an enormous amount of pressure to deliver services as rapidly as possible.”* Impact evaluations can be seen at odds with this time constraint due to the time required to establish research partnerships, identify an appropriate design, and conduct baseline data collection (when needed).

Researchers highlighted that assessing intermediate outcomes is one path to navigating the challenge of a short window for certain outcomes to manifest. For example, rather than looking at changes in agricultural yields, one can look at adoption of improved agricultural practices as this would change more rapidly and is theoretically correlated with the outcome of interest. Implementers, funders, and researchers alike also highlighted that this constraint is less of a challenge in protracted emergency contexts, in which many emergencies have been ongoing for years. In fact, most of the existing evidence base on humanitarian programming is in [these contexts](#).

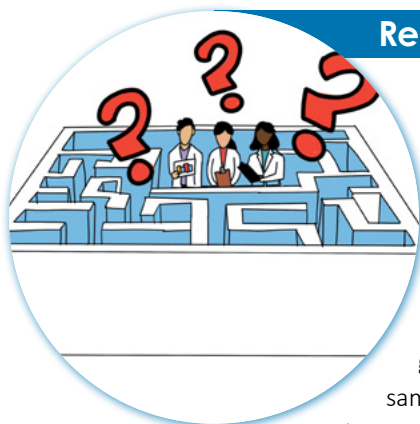
### HAEC’s Response to Navigating the Constraint

As most respondents underscored, limited research preparation time is less of a challenge in protracted emergency contexts. **Most humanitarian programming takes place in these contexts.** Year after year, implementers in these protracted crises are often utilizing the same – or similar- programmatic approaches. Thus, implementers and funders both recognized the opportunity for increased research to generate learning that can be embedded in future programming and funding.

However, the question remains, *is it possible to do impact evaluations in rapid onset emergency contexts?* To reduce research preparation time, HAEC designed and implemented an expedited Internal Review Board (IRB) process for its funded impact evaluations to demonstrate a process that is effective and easily navigated. Additionally, HAEC develops and disseminates tools and templates to minimize research preparation time for BHA-funded emergency food security activities, such as consent forms, survey tools, and code for conducting sampling calculations.

However, HAEC believes that meaningfully overcoming this constraint would require a shift in how funders procure impact evaluations; it would necessitate funding mechanisms that allow [the pre-positioning of partnerships and research designs](#). Such partnerships and research designs could be designed ex ante and be set up to be immediately deployed once a crisis occurs. While this may seem like a pipe dream, some research partners have been able to [set this up](#).

## Research Implementation Challenges



### Constraint Findings

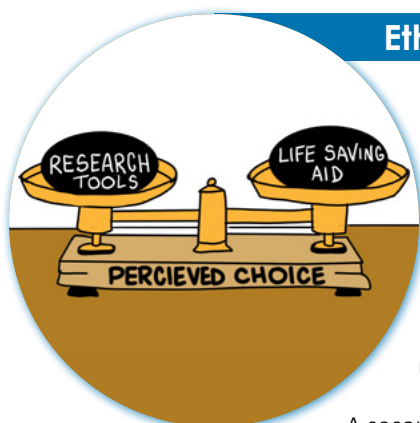
Humanitarian contexts present unique research implementation challenges. One key implementation challenge is security constraints, which can pose a significant barrier to impact evaluation design in humanitarian settings. Many contexts can be challenging or dangerous for enumerators, making data collection difficult or even impossible. In situations where data collection is deemed safe, volatile environments and rapidly changing security conditions present challenges for research teams who grapple with decisions on how to best keep their teams safe. Limited access reduces sample size and may compromise the generalizability of results. Population movement is also common in humanitarian contexts as conflict or environmental crises generate population displacement. This has implications for impact evaluation studies as it makes it difficult to track respondents, rendering high attrition a prominent technical risk.

### HAEC's Response to Navigating the Constraint

Fortunately, there are many innovations in data collection technology to navigate these challenges, such as phone, Interacted Voice Response (IVR), or SMS surveys that researchers can conduct remotely. However, these approaches come with their own limitations and may not be appropriate in every context. Teams must plan for high attrition in these contexts. The same mitigation strategies that development-focused researchers use, such as planning for a larger sample size or devoting resources for tracking participants, can work in these settings, but need to be intensified.

Further, HAEC documents the research implementation challenges on its six funded studies, as well as other impact evaluations submitted through the [Evaluation in Action](#) series on impact evaluations in humanitarian settings. This documentation covers a diverse range of implementation challenges and showcases how research teams have navigated them. These learnings will provide crucial insights into the wide range of practical challenges and how they can be addressed with varying degrees of success.

## Ethical Concerns



### Constraint Findings

Working with such vulnerable populations raises many ethical concerns for stakeholders. A key ethical pushback on impact evaluations in humanitarian settings, particularly from implementers, is the perception that these activities divert valuable resources away from life-saving aid to research. As summarized by a USAID/BHA staff person, *"In the implementer perspective, it's a decision between cost of providing relief or cost of an [impact evaluation]."* While this misconception is present in development settings, it is even more salient in humanitarian settings when assistance is immediately saving or sustaining lives.

A second concern raised by implementers is the ethical ramifications of experimental impact evaluation designs. This is the belief that withholding programming from vulnerable populations to construct a control group is definitively unethical. This is also a common critique of randomized control trials (RCTs) across social impact settings. In humanitarian settings, this concern is more critical given what is at stake. As one implementer stated, *"There is normally a universal approach to coverage for humanitarian response that makes having a control group really hard. Everybody that needs attention should get it."*

The third ethical concern arising from impact evaluations in humanitarian settings pertains to the respondent burden associated with surveys. The vulnerability of populations in humanitarian context is significantly more acute due to the nature of the context, which raises ethical questions about conducting surveys with these program participants. This is exacerbated by the fact that

humanitarian contexts are typically subject to regular needs assessments and program monitoring requirements; program participants are already inundated with multiple survey requests.

### HAEC’s Response to Navigating the Constraint

These findings indicate that implementers perceive a direct trade-off between funding for an impact evaluation and delivering relief. This does not need to be the case. For example, funders can provide separate funding mechanisms for evaluations and programming to diminish this perception. Equally, a well-designed impact evaluation can pave the way for increased cost-effective delivery of programming, increasing the support to at risk and vulnerable populations in the future.

Additionally, researchers can design impact evaluations to ensure all research participants can still receive life-saving support. There are several tried and tested ways to circumvent withholding services through research design choices, [such as A|B testing approaches](#) that do not require pure control groups or leveraging quasi-experimental approaches in situations where assistance has been targeted. A|B testing approaches, which directly compare different modalities, have the added benefit that they usually answer highly specific questions for implementers on the most effective or cost-effective way to implement programs. Finally, randomized evaluations may be justified in settings where demand for services outweighs available resources. In these cases, randomly allocating who receives services may be a fair and ethical approach for distributing aid.

*“There is normally a universal approach to coverage for humanitarian response that makes having a control group really hard. Everybody that needs attention should get it.”*

Regarding survey burden, to minimize the additional surveying time, research teams can include questions needed for the impact evaluation in implementers’ existing data collection plans (i.e., internal monitoring). This is especially relevant in an A|B testing approach where all respondents would be program participants. In cases where there are comparison groups outside of program participants, this may still be possible presuming additional funding is provided to cover the larger sample requirements.

HAEC is demonstrating how to overcome these constraints in several ways. First, through funding six impact evaluations in the humanitarian sector, HAEC is demonstrating a proof of concept for the existence of a funding mechanism that can be procured separately from programming activity applications. Second, HAEC encourages its funded impact evaluations to focus on operational research questions utilizing A|B testing approaches that avoid the need for a pure control group. Finally, through its funded studies and other studies it disseminates, HAEC is committed to demonstrating how logistical and ethical issues in humanitarian settings can be overcome through creative design approaches, leveraging existing data sources – specifically existing program monitoring data – and planned surveys, and minimizing survey time.



Photo credit: Sacha Myers / Save the Children

## Recommendations

Through analysis of the consultations, HAEC identified that while both perceived and real constraints to conducting impact evaluations in humanitarian settings exist, there are ample opportunities to navigate these real and perceived constraints. Below are recommendations for the donor and implementer communities to increase the utilization of impact evaluations for optimizing humanitarian interventions, improving their efficacy for some of the world's most vulnerable populations.

### Recommendations for donors:

- 1. Create positive incentives for implementers to conduct impact evaluations when and where they are appropriate.** Given their potential to influence implementers, donors can increase uptake of impact evaluations through several mechanisms:
  - a. Donors can enact and better enforce requirements to conduct impact evaluations to signal that, in appropriate contexts, these are desired over alternative evaluation approaches.
  - b. Donors can explore the creation of separate funding mechanisms for impact evaluations to remove the perception that including an impact evaluation in a grant application could diminish the cost competitiveness of grant proposals.
  - c. Donors should perceive and effectively communicate to implementers that impact evaluation findings are not a reflection of implementer performance (as other evaluation approaches are for) but an opportunity to discover how to best optimize programming to implement donor strategy.
- 2. Use procurement mechanisms that encourage private sector partners to enter the market.** Given their inherent flexibility and incentives to align with implementer learning priorities, private sector partners should be attractive research partners. However, funding mechanisms that are commonly used at USAID/BHA, such as grants and cooperative agreements, are less common and perceived as riskier for these actors. Donors should consider different mechanisms- including contracts- that sufficiently incentivize the private sector.
- 3. Explore funding mechanisms that allow the pre-positioning of partnerships and research designs.** Currently funding structures do not allow for swift research start up in the face of rapid onset crises. To conduct impact evaluations of programming in these types of contexts, pre-positioning of research and partnerships is critical.

### Recommendations for implementers:

- 1. View impact evaluations as an opportunity to optimize programming rather than as a measure of organizational performance.** Impact evaluations offer an opportunity for implementers to identify how to maximize outcomes out of limited resources for their participants. Leveraging creative research design approaches, such as A|B testing, is a powerful option for answering these types of optimization and operational research questions.
- 2. Shift resources from less informative outcome evaluations/performance evaluations to impact evaluations.** Implementers are currently utilizing resources on outcome evaluations and performance evaluations; however, they do not answer causal questions that enable them to improve the design of humanitarian programs. Outcome evaluations cannot address implementer questions on impact or inform how to optimize programming. Rather than conducting more evaluations, reallocating resources to different evaluation types would have minimal effect on M&E budgets and increase learning around how to best design humanitarian programs.
- 3. Invest in capacity of M&E staff to more effectively coordinate impact evaluations.** While the bandwidth challenge for implementers is unlikely to change, M&E staff – particularly non-activity level technical support staff – can manage the coordination of impact evaluations with research partners and triage requests to field staff to protect their time. To support M&E staff at country, regional, and global levels to play this role, implementers need to invest more in the M&E staff impact evaluation skills, so they are equipped with knowledge on the requirements of different impact evaluation methods.
- 4. Seek research partners with an implementer-aligned focus.** When implementers and research partners have different learning priorities, there is often conflict in the research partnership. Implementers should specifically seek out research partners that have aligned learning agendas to facilitate more effective partnerships and have a clear willingness to be flexible with the research design and questions as research and programming begin. In particular, private sector partners have a strong implementer focus and so will have the same learning priorities.

# Appendix

## Consultation Report Methodology

Between May and November 2022, the HAEC team conducted interviews with 68 stakeholders including implementers, funders, and researchers. The team conducted the semi-structured interviews using topical guides; HAEC used one topical guide for implementing partners and funders and a second for researchers. Table 1 outlines the number of respondents in each stakeholder category: implementers, funders, and researchers. Furthermore, in the table, HAEC categorized implementers by those with monitoring and evaluation (M&E) experience and those without M&E experience. HAEC further disaggregated researchers by academics, such as those employed by the World Bank or by universities, and those in the private sector. There was an additional small category of researchers who were directly employed by NGO organizations. All funders were representatives of USAID/BHA.

**Table 1 - Expert Consultations by the Numbers**

Implementers		USAID/BHA staff	Researchers		
23			11	34	
M&E	Non-M&E	Academic		Private	NGO embedded
12	11	15		16	3

A HAEC team member took notes during the interviews with the assistance of the transcription software, Otter.ai, for post-interview refinement and quality assurance. The team imported all interview notes into matrices for analysis – one for implementers and funders and one for researchers. The team then coded each response and identified themes based on overarching patterns emerging in the data. These themes aligned with key questions in the topical guides.

### Implementer/Funder Topical Guide

Thank you for taking some time to discuss your experience as an implementer/manager of humanitarian programs. As mentioned in our email, our goal with these consultations is to understand the landscape of impact evaluations being conducted in the humanitarian sector and the barriers that exist to conducting more impact evaluations in this context. By humanitarian, we mean programming to meet needs arising from natural and manmade disasters. Today we have some questions for you about your experience and perspective of conducting impact evaluations in the humanitarian sector.



Photo credit: Thoko Chikondi / Daily Mirror



## Intro

1. What is your role at [INSERT ORGANIZATION]? Tell me a little about your responsibilities within that role.

## Familiarity with concept / lexicon

2. First, when you hear of the phrase “impact evaluations in humanitarian contexts,” what comes to mind?
  - a. Probe: How do you define humanitarian?
3. What is your understanding of what an impact evaluation is and what questions it can answer?
  - a. Probe: What types of questions is an impact evaluation able to answer that a performance evaluation cannot?
  - b. Probe: Are you familiar with what an RCT is? Quasi-experimental designs?

## Experience being part of an Impact Evaluation (IE)

4. Have you ever commissioned, partnered, or worked on a project subject to an IE? If so, can you tell me about the experience?
  - a. Probe: How was your relationship with the PI/Researcher firm?
  - b. Probe: How were the Research Questions decided on?
  - c. Probe: Who collected the data? Was the data used for anything else?
  - d. Probe: How long did it take for you to get the results? How did the results impact the program/future operations?
  - e. Probe: Was the IE integrated into your project’s M&E?
5. What are features and constraints unique to the humanitarian context you think should be considered when designing and conducting impact evaluations?
6. In your opinion, what are the most important skills / characteristics that researchers/evaluators designing and conducting impact evaluations in the humanitarian sector should have?

## Barriers to conducting IEs in the humanitarian sector

Now we’d like to ask you some questions about conducting impact evaluations in the humanitarian context more broadly.

7. If you wanted to conduct an IE of one of your humanitarian programs, who would you need to convince in your organization in order to make it happen?
  - a. Probe: Who are the critical stakeholders for getting buy-in?
8. What do you see as the key barriers to conducting impact evaluations in humanitarian contexts in general?
  - a. Probe: Is it more demand side e.g., implementer willingness and interest? Or more supply side e.g., pool of interested and capable researchers?
9. Do you know of any other impact evaluations that have been conducted or are being conducted on humanitarian programming? If so, what are they?
10. For the impact evaluations you know of, what were the primary factors that enabled them to be conducted?
  - a. Probe: What factors allowed for stakeholder buy-in?
  - b. Probe: What factors allowed for a feasible impact evaluation design?

## Learning priorities

11. Taking a step back, what do you see as the biggest unanswered questions in the humanitarian sector?

## Moving forward

12. Is there anything else about conducting impact evaluations in the humanitarian context you’d like to tell us that you haven’t already?

13. Do you know of researchers doing impact evaluations of humanitarian programming that we could reach out to?

## Researcher Topical Guide

Thank you for taking some time to discuss your experience as an impact evaluator / researcher. As mentioned in our email, our goal with these consultations is to understand the landscape of impact evaluations being conducted in the humanitarian sector and the barriers that exist to conducting more impact evaluations in this context. By humanitarian, we mean programming to meet needs arising from natural and manmade disasters. Today we have some questions for you about your experience and perspective of conducting impact evaluations in the humanitarian sector.

### Intro

1. What is your role at [INSERT ORGANIZATION]? Tell me a little about your responsibilities within that role.
  - a. Capture org type
2. First, when you hear of the phrase “impact evaluations in humanitarian contexts,” what comes to mind?

### Experience with IEs in the humanitarian sector

3. Have you ever conducted an RCT or Quasi experimental IE? Have you conducted these in a humanitarian setting? If so, can you tell me about the study?
  - a. Probe: What was the study design? (To validate if IE)
  - b. Probe: What was the setting in which it was conducted?
  - c. Probe: Is the study ongoing or has it wrapped up?
4. Do you know of other impact evaluations that have been conducted or are being conducted on humanitarian programming? If so, what are they?

### Barriers to conducting IEs in the humanitarian sector

Now we'd like to ask you some questions about conducting impact evaluations in the humanitarian context more broadly.

5. What do you see as the key barriers to conducting impact evaluations in humanitarian contexts in general?
  - a. Probe: Is it more demand side e.g., implementer willingness and interest? Or more supply side e.g., pool of interested and capable researchers?
6. For the impact evaluations you know of, what were the primary factors that enabled them to be conducted?
  - a. Probe: What factors allowed for stakeholder buy-in?
  - b. Probe: What factors allowed for a feasible impact evaluation design?
  - c. Probe: What was the staffing structure (e.g., embedded staff or remote? Contracted or internal?)
  - d. Probe: Was it primary or admin data?
7. What implementer partner characteristics enable (or hinder) collaboration and partnership between the activity team and researcher (both in preparation and execution of the study)?

### Designing IEs in the humanitarian sector

8. Based on the barriers you mentioned, do you have advice on how one could adjust the evaluation design, preparation process or logistics to mitigate these?
  - a. How did the methods adapt/adjust? How did this impact the research?
  - b. How did field logistics adapt/adjust? How did this impact the research?

9. In your opinion, what are the most important skills / characteristics that researchers/evaluators designing and conducting impact evaluations in the humanitarian sector should have?
10. If someone were to invite you to collaborate on an IE in this context, what would make a potential research partnership compelling to you?
  - a. *Probe: Do you have any hard requirements for collaboration?*
  - b. *Probe: What is the role of publication in your incentive structure?*

### **Mentorship model**

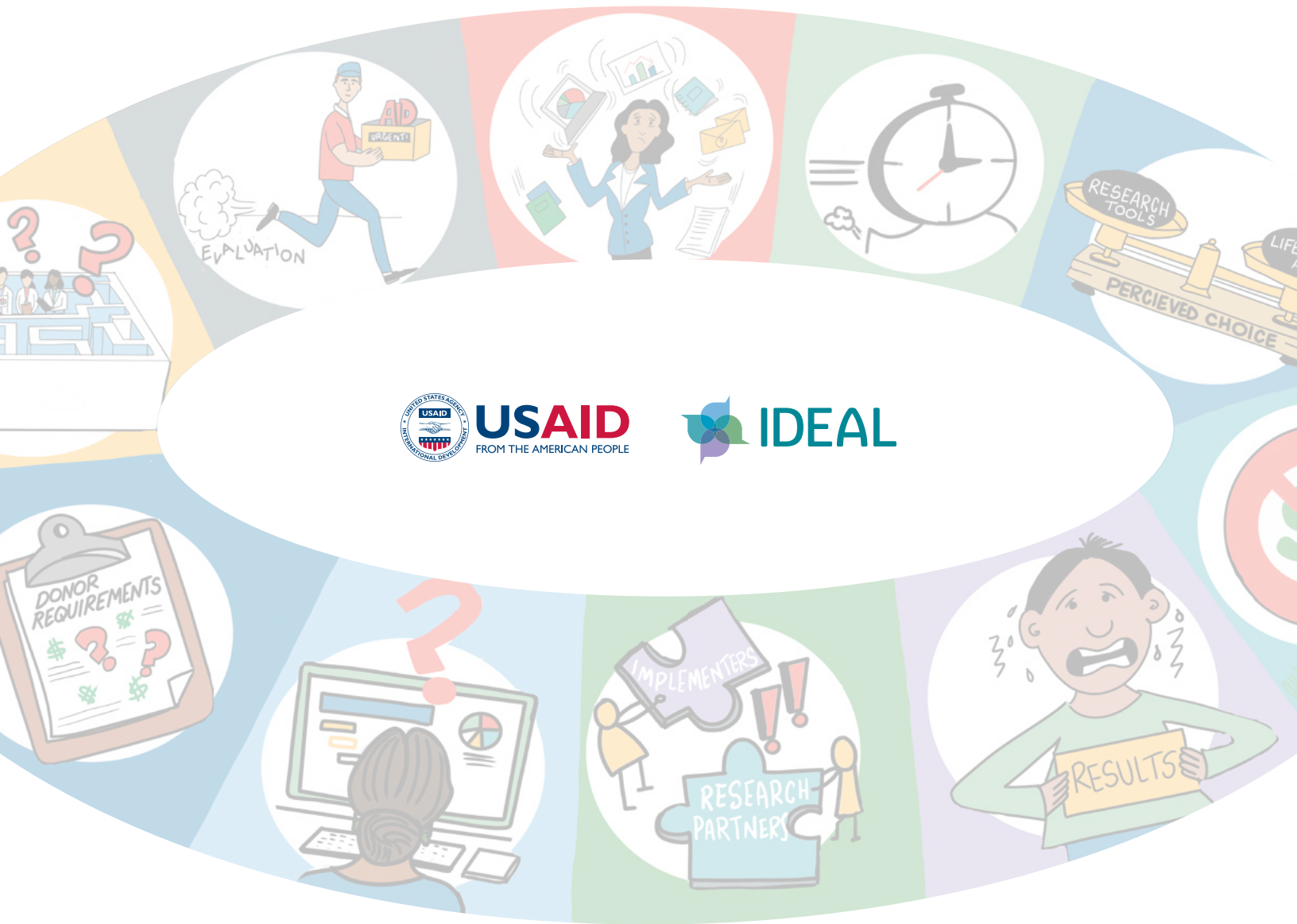
11. One of the goals of HAEC is local technical capacity development. To facilitate this, we'd ideally like every HAEC funded IE to have a researcher from a low-income country. Depending on their capacity, we'd pair them with a PI with more experience in a mentor-mentee relationship. What's your reaction to this idea?
  - a. *Probe: Any advice on how to set up a partnership for success?*
  - b. *Probe: Any pitfalls to avoid?*
12. [OPTIONAL DEPENDING ON PROFILE] We are compiling a list of researchers that would be interested in playing the role of a PI on a HAEC funded impact evaluation. This person would also be responsible for mentoring a more junior researcher from a low-income country. Would this be a role that you would be interested in?

### **Moving forward**

13. Is there anything else about conducting impact evaluations in the humanitarian context you'd like to tell us that you haven't already?
14. Do you know of researchers conducting or interested in conducting impact evaluations of humanitarian programming that we could reach out to?



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Conor Ashleigh / Save the Children



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