A SCOPING STUDY – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TOWARDS ENHANCING THE KNOWLEDGE OF THOSE LEARNING ABOUT HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND/OR GLOBAL HEALTH

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Systematic reviews are a mechanism for research findings to be reviewed and conclusions drawn about what works and what does not. They are increasingly recognised by donors, such as DFID and AusAID, as central to evidenced based decision making, not only in international development but also the humanitarian sector.

Following the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami Evidence Aid was founded, as a branch of the Cochrane Collaboration, in response to the need for reliable information by people engaged in disaster planning and response. The Evidence Aid mission statement is “to improve effective access to systematic reviews on the effects of interventions and action of relevance before, during and after natural disasters and other humanitarian emergencies to improve health related outcomes” One of the most appropriate avenues to improve access to systematic reviews is through those institutions that teach and train existing and future humanitarian aid workers. This study was specifically commissioned to assess the extent to which systematic reviews and the evidence base are incorporated into the learning and training of those existing and future humanitarian aid workers.

More specifically the study aimed to identify trends in learning about systematic reviews and the evidence base in the curriculum of a sample of courses that have a primary focus on international health and/or health outcomes in humanitarian action. Additionally, the study aimed to establish an excel database of the sample courses as the foundation of a knowledge bank for future interactions with Evidence Aid and last but not least to make other recommendations related to enhancing the use of systematic reviews and the evidence base in humanitarian action/global health.

MAIN FINDINGS

The study did not clearly establish trends as to what extent systematic reviews and the evidence base is incorporated into the learning and training of decision makers in humanitarian emergencies. The limited information gained from the survey would indicate that the incorporation of systematic reviews and the evidence base is perhaps patchy and not ingrained as fundamental to the learning and training of future and present decision makers at this point in time. This would also be inferred from the desk review and database establishment, where there was no apparent mention of systematic reviews within curriculum or dialogue.

In addition no clear findings emerged on how best to support institutions in the learning and training of humanitarian decision makers. Only a process of dialogue with such institutions will best determine how to support them. This dialogue could be instigated at the global level such as via the International Humanitarian Studies Association (IHSA)’s associated conferences and meetings.

However, it is also clear from the wider analysis that the world of learning and training for humanitarian decision makers is evolving quickly, is multi-faceted and much broader in scope than Masters or PhDs in humanitarian action/global health as discussed here. Support for the incorporation of systematic reviews and evidence based decision making needs to go far beyond the learning and training environment examined within the scope of this study. Evidence based decision making needs to be supported not only in learning and training at a variety of levels (i.e. Masters level courses and short intensive courses like the Certificates in Advanced Studies offered at CERAH), but also become integrated into the continuous learning and professional development of humanitarian actors (through networks such as ALNAP and ELRHA) and by extension become part of the aid culture. In the context of Linking Relief and Rehabilitation to Development one could argue that evidence based decision making in humanitarian contexts also become a part of development learning, training and professional development and thus the culture and policy of the wider aid sector.
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More specifically the following objectives were (or were not) met

1. Trends in the area of learning and training were not established as hoped. This failure directly relates to the paucity of data gathered from the survey due to low response levels which in itself might be indicative of current awareness regarding the importance of systematic reviews and the evidence base in the meeting of humanitarian objectives and more specifically health outcomes.

2. An excel database was established containing a sample selection of 64 taught courses delivered in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom and South Africa. This database formed the basis of the survey but is by no means exhaustive for the sample countries selected and the wider world. It does however act as the basis for a living database should evidence aid and/or other body decide this is an appropriate communication and information tool for it to use.

3. A number of recommendations were made related to increasing links with humanitarian action and/or global health programmes to increase and enhance the use of systematic reviews.

Main Recommendations

Evidence Aid or like-minded bodies need to engage more with academia to firstly raise awareness about the role of systematic reviews in evidence based decision making, secondly to identify the most effective ways Evidence Aid can support the delivery of the evidence aid training objectives and thirdly be in a position either directly or with partners to respond to the stimulated demand it aims to create.

Beyond the academic world Evidence Aid should link with other training institutions who are engaged in the continued professional development of existing humanitarian aid workers.

Outside of academia and other training institutions Evidence Aid or similar body could link with other organisations and networks in the humanitarian sector such as ELRHA, ALNAP, CERAH, IHSA etc. and develop a comprehensive strategy to make systematic reviews and the evidence base an integral part of the entire humanitarian to development system, instead of on an adhoc basis delivered in learning/training on post graduate courses such as those identified in the sample database.