Yale MACMILLAN CENTER

Program on Refugees, Forced Displacement, and Humanitarian Responses

PO Box 208206
New Haven CT 06520-8206 USA
T 203 436-3517
F 203 432-2393

courier
34 Hillhouse Avenue
New Haven CT 06511

Health and Humanitarian Action: Bridging the Gaps between Research and Practice

Workshop Synthesis Report

Date: 13 April 2018
Venue: Yale University
Participants: Abby Stoddard, Ahmad Tarakji, Anthony Banbury, Charles MacCormack, Jeannie Annan, Nicholas Alipui, Paul Spiegel, Saadiyah Bilal
Organizers: Catherine Panter-Brick, Kaveh Khoshnood, Hannah Strohmeier

Background
The gap between academic research and practice in the field of humanitarian action is widely recognized. Reasons for this disconnect include challenges related to funding, logistics, the power to set an agenda, and ethical considerations of undertaking research during crises (1, 2). "Cultural differences" between researchers and practitioners contribute to the persistency of the divide, too: humanitarians oftentimes see academics as "theoretical", "unrealistic", and "disconnected", and academics frequently identify humanitarians as "misfits", "missionaries" (3). This gap between humanitarian research and practice leaves powerful synergies untapped and the potential for improved humanitarian interventions through meaningful cooperation underutilized.

Objective
Sponsored by the MacMillan Center's Programme on Refugees, Forced Displacement and Humanitarian Responses, the workshop "Health and Humanitarian Action: Bridging Gaps between Research and Practice" aimed to address this gap. Specifically, the workshop brought together distinguished practitioners and academics working on health in humanitarian crises to discuss challenges and opportunities to foster effective relationships. The workshop constituted the start of an important conversation that will be carried into additional forums at Yale University in 2018-19.

Case studies and podcasts
In preparation for the workshop, participants wrote a total of 6 short case examples in response to these questions:

a. Speaking as a *scholar*, how has your research concretely influenced humanitarian policy and practice?
b. Speaking as a *practitioner*, how has research influenced the kind of policy and practice you have been involved with?

These cases explained ways in which the interface between research and practice has been positive, or conversely, ways in which academics, practitioners, or policy-makers overlooked each other. They also reflect on why this happened, and what factors were in play.

The workshop comprised of two sessions. The first session was devoted to the introduction and discussion of these case examples. The second session focused on crystallizing insights and formulating key messages that inform future collaboration between academics and practitioners in the field of health and humanitarian action.

Workshop participants and facilitators also recorded podcasts. One podcast, moderated by Kaveh Khoshnood, covers thoughts of Ahmad Tarakji, Jeannie Annan, and Paul Spiegel on workshop related questions, such as why there is a gap between research and practice in the field of health and humanitarian action. A second podcast will be recorded with Catherine Panter-Brick to wrap up the workshop findings. Both podcasts will be made available online through Yale University.

Key Themes and Messages
The key themes and messages that emerged during workshop discussions focus largely on barriers that impede meaningful cooperation between academics and practitioners. These key themes and messages are:

• *Research agenda of stakeholders are broad and diverse.* Stakeholders, including academic institutions, humanitarian organizations and donors identify very diverse needs and priorities in terms of research topics. Currently, there is no systematic approach in place that facilitates setting a prioritized global research agenda. Further, academics are oftentimes called-upon at a late stage and requested to research the "wrong" questions. Instead of investigating what works, the "right" question to ask would be why it works (or not).
• *Current approaches to cooperation are ad hoc, unsystematic, and optional.* For the most part, cooperation between academics and practitioners is established on an ad hoc, unsystematic basis. Cooperation is optional and heavily dependent on personal networks. Thus, research cooperations are not necessarily based on need and the choice of academic and organizational partners at times suboptimal.
• *Partnerships are rarely evaluated.* The quality of partnerships between academics and practitioners as well as the uptake of the outputs of these partnerships are rarely evaluated. While bodies, such as Lancet commissions and ALNAP, are making efforts to list partnerships and research cooperation, information on their efficacy is not publicly available.
• *Humanitarian organizations are reluctant to receiving and utilizing critical research results.* Generally, fruitful cooperation is challenging to achieve, and research results that suggest shifts in organizational policy and programming put an additional strain on partnerships. Organizations oftentimes perceive such results as criticism and are reluctant to receiving, utilizing and publicize such results (e.g., due to concerns related to future funding and reputation), which in turn is challenging from an academic standpoint.
• *Set-up of the academic system impedes effective cooperation.* Academics compete for data and rely on publications in peer-reviewed journals. These months-long processes contradict the interest of organizations that require results quickly. Further, the limited availability of funds for humanitarian research presents a challenge. This situation is aggravated by the traditional/dominant funding system applied by US Universities, which heavily relies on grant giving from external funders. This system does not incentivize cooperation with Universities from the global South and other relevant stakeholders. Novel funding mechanisms, such as R2HC, are more conducive; R2HC aims to increase the quality and quantity of collaborative research on public health challenges in humanitarian crises.
• *Setting-up in-house knowledge broker systems is good practice.* IRC's model of having an in-house unit that undertakes rigorous research and translates findings into practice is as an effective – and replicable – model to ensure research is needs based, shifts in programming evidence based, and results benefit beneficiaries.

Ideas for the future

The workshop discussions allowed formulating a series of ideas for the future based on need. Some of these ideas, such as developing guidelines for more effective cooperation, address the key themes and messages directly. Other ideas, such as those focusing on students, aim at influencing the humanitarian sector in the long-term through a focus on the next generation of academics and practitioners. The ideas may be taken up by workshop participants and realized as individual or collective efforts in the future.

• *Developing guidelines for cooperation.* These guidelines are envisioned to spell out principles of cooperation between academics and practitioners, including when to work together and in what way. Once endorsed by key stakeholders (academic institutions, organizations, and donors), these guidelines will help a great deal in establishing systematic, long-term, and thus more effective partnerships.

• *Organizing a graduate student conference*. This conference is intended to bring together graduate students from diverse countries with a strong focus and research interest in the field of humanitarian action. The conference will allow students to formally present experiences and lessons learned, receive feedback, and establish networks with likeminded students. The conference will also provide students with the opportunity to engage with selected practitioners and scholars who will be invited to deliver short talks or engage in panel discussions. Universities will rotate in hosting this conference.

• *Organizing a "Hackathon"*. This initiative is envisioned to bring together students from different universities and disciplines to work together towards innovative solutions for challenges in humanitarian crises. One example is the cooperation between the American University of Beirut, Johns Hopkins University, and Boston University that brought together 50 students from different disciplines for three weeks to develop solutions for refugee and humanitarian health challenges (4). Another example is the Yale International Policy Competition, where 15 teams of Yale students tackled the problem of rebuilding the Iraqi city of Mosul in a policy competition in early 2018 (5).

• *Editing case studies.* Once edited and compiled, the case studies prepared for the workshop are intended to be used for teaching and learning purposes and benefit students, faculty, and practitioners.

References

1. de Waal A. Policy to research to policy in difficult places Humanity: Humanity; 2015 [cited 2017 27 November]. Available from: http://humanityjournal.org/blog/policy-to-research-to-policy-in-difficult-places/.
2. Levine AC. Academics are from Mars, humanitarians are from Venus: Finding common ground to improve research during humanitarian emergencies. Clinical Trials. 2016;1(4).
3. Camburn J. Research partnerships in humanitarian contexts. Humanitarian Exchange. 2011(50):29-31.
4. "Students from AUB". Students from AUB and the US collaborate on solutions to health challenges in crises: American University of Beirut; 2018 [cited 2018 6 May]. Available from: https://http://www.aub.edu.lb/fhs/news/Pages/humanitarian_engineering18.aspx.
5. Hu A, Pham LV. Students host first-ever international policy competition: Yale News; 2018 [cited 2018 6 May]. Available from: https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2018/02/13/students-host-first-ever-international-policy-competition/.