Integrating social science into humanitarian policy: the case of health emergencies and the 'Social Science for Humanitarian Action' Platform.

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Abstract

From Ebola in West Africa, to the drought and famine in the Horn of Africa and Yemen, Syria and the European refugee crisis, there is increasing recognition of the need to engage more deeply and systematically with the social, political and economic contexts of health and humanitarian crises. Poor understanding of these dynamics and limited integration with local contexts has long been a source of frustration in the humanitarian and development community and 'context blind' responses can contribute to additional costs and harm.

To address this gap in anthropological, cultural and social political understanding in humanitarian and emergency contexts, UNICEF and the Institute of Development Studies launched "Social Science in Humanitarian Action, A Communication for Development Platform" in January 2017. The platform established a network of social science researchers and public health practitioners, created a repository of social science literature for health emergencies and offered a help desk service. This helpdesk service has produced rapid evidence reports to respond to the cholera outbreak in Somalia and to inform the roll-out of health programmes with the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

This paper will reflect on the challenges that the platform has encountered in order to provide social science analysis and evidence of the social dimensions of health emergencies and shape policy and action. In our view, in order for humanitarian health policy to be adequate, socially and culturally inclusive and relevant, we must explore three social and cultural dimensions: (i) political economy: enquiring how power, resources and interests distributed across different stakeholders in times of crisis and how can humanitarian responses work in ways which reduce inequality and marginalisation; (ii) social difference and vulnerability: analysing how social, political, economic and spatial differences shape vulnerabilities to and from humanitarian crises, including responses to them; and lastly (iii) community engagement and vulnerability: exploring how local populations, and their views and capacities, be meaningfully engaged; and enquiring how historical, social and cultural rationales influence interactions between affected populations and humanitarian actors.