Knowledge production in humanitarian crises: beware of the innovation trap

Kadir and colleagues[1] have outlined some of the challenges that affect the ability to accurately quantify the effect of conflict on mortality and health, and associated risk factors. However, they inaccurately suggest that mortality estimates "are based primarily on reports from combating parties, news media, and non-governmental organisations." This might be the case for the Uppsala Conflict Data Program to which they refer, which draws from the media and reports from non-governmental organisations, as well as a smaller sample of other sources.[2] However, in addition to systematic body count analyses, many other approaches exist to estimate mortality, including the commonly used retrospective mortality survey, key informant interviews for acute recall, and, where feasible, prospective surveillance.[3] To counteract limitations intrinsic to each approach, triangulation of sources is key. Capture-recapture analyses have proven helpful in this regard, as shown by a recent analysis of deaths during civil demonstrations in Sudan in 2019.[4]

Kadir and colleagues[1] proceed to call for "new innovative research methods", without qualifying what such innovation might look like. Collaboration with local people and organisations is emphasised, which we perceive as a component of good research practice, but argue is far from innovative. Our recent research suggests that the humanitarian health research community rarely recognise or use innovative research methods, and are more interested in the innovative application of established methods.[5] As such, we emphasise the need to improve the application of existing research methods, and to document and publicise both the successes and failures of adaptive practice.

Most pertinent in relation to an improved understanding of humanitarian crises, health, and the effectiveness of interventions, is a need to ask the right research questions. This action can only be done with genuine community consultation and engagement. Improvements to the quality of routine data collection, and increased investment in the analysis of existing data, are also essential. Additionally, mixed methods research holds great promise, and yet qualitative methods remain underused.

We must avoid calls for innovation that distract from opportunities to improve the use of existing data and methods, and that undermine the pursuit of a more radical re-imagination of hierarchies of knowledge production and power imbalances intrinsic to many research processes. As Tom Scott-Smith suggests, a continued "love of novelty" will leave researchers and practitioners alike "blind to the often mundane humanitarian practices that really change people's lives".[6]

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