Report on Regional workshops – Humanitarian Encyclopedia
(August 2018-February 2019)

Can’t see the wood for the trees?

The Humanitarian Encyclopedia project is informed by the views and experiences of humanitarian practitioners.

To elicit their opinions on key concepts used in their daily practice and to assess their needs for a better understanding of the concepts, nine workshops in seven locations across the world, gathered more than 150 professionals.

The workshops were essential in informing the final selection of key concepts, ensuring that the design and structure of the digital platform corresponds to the expectations of humanitarian professionals, shedding more light on the issue of language and considerably enlarging the network of humanitarian partner organisations to be involved in the project.

We would like to whole-heartedly thank all participants for their time and great contributions!
Background

With an estimated 570,000 people working in some 4,500 organizations, not counting the tens of thousands of individual and spontaneous initiatives, today’s diversity of geographical, cultural, organizational, linguistic, and professional profiles in the humanitarian field is simply unprecedented.

Despite such diversity, the existing narratives and concepts of humanitarian action still largely reflect the values and practices of long-established organizations of high-income countries. At a time when practitioners are called upon to increase local ownership of humanitarian programmes, key concepts must be contextualized and adapted to the local realities of crisis-affected communities.

The Humanitarian Encyclopedia project, through its participatory approach, collectively interrogates how humanitarian concepts are used – across time, geographical contexts, organizational cultures, disciplinary backgrounds, and professions – to bring about greater coherence and effectiveness of humanitarian action. It aims to:

- improve mutual understanding among practitioners;
- accompany the localization of humanitarian knowledge;
- render the sector more legible to external stakeholders including media, governments, military, and the general public; and
- contribute to the training of current and future generations of humanitarian practitioners.

In 2018 the foundations of the project were laid, including an intensive consultative process with humanitarian actors through a series of regional workshops.

The objectives of the workshops were to:

- enable humanitarian practitioners to express, using their own terminology, the core concepts they use in their daily practice
- assess their needs for a better understanding of the concepts and preferred modalities to use and contribute to the Humanitarian Encyclopedia
- explore how concepts may be differently framed and salient in languages other than English

Nine workshops gathered more than 150 humanitarian professionals from a variety of organisations in Delhi, Kuala Lumpur, Bamako, Nairobi, Beirut, Erbil and Mexico. In addition, in Kuala Lumpur one workshop gathered refugees (Same Skies). These workshops were implemented in close collaboration with our partners: Seeds India, ADIMI, Mercy Malaysia, Groupe URD, COAN/Sofadec, Humanitarian Leadership Academy, AMEL, Islamic relief, Humanity&Inclusion and the Instituto Mora. We would like to thank them for their commitment.

A rigorous and replicable methodology allowed us to gather information in a systematic manner. The method was pilot tested in Geneva in June 2018 and adapted accordingly. Seven workshops were organised in English, the Mali workshop took place in French and the Mexico workshop in Spanish.

Some of the main outcomes of the workshops are summarised in the following pages.
What is an Encyclopedia?

At the outset participants described what an Encyclopedia means for them. Five themes emerged from the discussions.

The Enlightenment Encyclopedia

... considered as the sum of knowledge available at a given time. It is an index of this universal knowledge. This vision relies on knowledge created by "experts". The reference to the dictionary (illustrated) is omnipresent.

The idea of a source of knowledge is also very present. Users want to find elements from expert work, "facts", but there is also mention of education, learning and study. All elements should be accessible and easily found.

The vision of the knowledge tree is strongly rooted in the imagination. It is used as a metaphor, particularly because of the role attributed to roots and therefore to the historical continuity it introduces in the study of concepts.

This vision is based on the physical form of the object. If the book rather enjoys a good image (liberation through knowledge, etc.), it is also associated with an elitist vision ("intellectual"). This reference to the book is often associated with a qualification of the book as "big".

The idea of a network is also very present. This relates to
- the diversity of the actors, the complementarity of their points of view;
- an assembly of content from various sources (e.g. courses, events, data, produced by humanitarian partners).

... and is connected to the vision of the Encyclopedia as the one stop shop in the centre of the humanitarian network.
What are the most salient concepts in humanitarian practice?

One very important result from the workshops is the contribution to the final selection of concepts that will form the entries of Encyclopedia. Overall, workshop participants proposed 860 concepts, of which many were quoted several times or were very similar. After cleaning 339 concepts remained.

Some concepts were cited very prominently in all workshops as shown in the ‘word cloud’ opposite.

The word cloud is characterised by the predominance of terms which refer to key areas of intervention of humanitarian organizations - nearly all areas or sectors of interventions are selected, as well as the norms and principles regulating humanitarian action. Most of the concepts have a long history of use in the humanitarian sector. A large number of concepts also referred to what participants considered as the outcomes of humanitarian action (empowerment, equality). In several workshops, participants expressed the need to better understand the differences between humanitarian and development work as well as to have a better sense of what the humanitarian-development nexus encompasses.

If we take a closer look at the 20 most selected concepts, resilience stands out followed by protection and inclusion.

How did we then reach a final list of 129 concepts?

The results of workshops were combined with results from two other methods. The content of 485 documents produced by humanitarian organizations (strategy documents and a sample of general publications) were analysed. This allowed us to identify 299 central concepts.

Furthermore, 1,400 humanitarian practitioners responded to an online survey choosing the concepts most salient in their daily work from several lists and adding further concepts. 280 concepts emerged.
The main objective of the online survey was to contribute to the identification of the concepts that will form the Humanitarian Encyclopedia entries, and to test the relevance of our research questions for humanitarian practitioners. 1,435 respondents connected to the survey and 1,060 completed it. Results of the survey confirm that definitions and uses of terms and concepts in the humanitarian sector are not consensual, that organizational factors are predominant in the use of concepts and that the region of work and discipline also seem to matter. 

The blog How do you speak humanitarian? Divergence on central concepts presented at the Humanitarian Evidence Week in November 2018 illustrates some of the results.

The results of the workshops, the survey and the documentary analysis were curated and “triangulated” using six criteria.

1. Concepts need to be specific to the humanitarian field or to have a specific meaning within the humanitarian field.
2. The selection of concepts needs to be demand-driven.
3. The selection needs to take an active stance to promote concepts which are central in non-Western and non-Anglophone culture.
4. Priority shall be given to concepts whose lack of clarity impacts humanitarian action and its enabling environment.
5. A proactive attention shall be paid to forward looking concepts, i.e. concepts which are emerging or are likely to be central in the future of humanitarian action.
6. The selection of concepts needs to keep a balance between different types of concepts.

As a result, a final list of 129 concepts with many associated concepts emerged. The Advisory Board and Scientific Committee of the Humanitarian Encyclopedia then discussed and validated the methodology and the final result. Practitioners have thus played a leading role in this concept selection process and in shaping the Humanitarian Encyclopedia architecture.
What would humanitarian professionals like to find in and contribute to the Encyclopedia?

What are the necessary elements for a better understanding of the concepts? The information provided should be easily understandable: a "simple" and "concise" definition could be complemented by elements of context (cultural, geographical, historical, semantic, testimonial). References and additional materials, including video and audio materials, would allow a visitor to dig deeper. The platform should be provided in a “light” format to facilitate rapid on-line use as well as off-line use.

The participatory nature of the future platform was not given high priority at this stage. Participants expect the platform to provide them with the opportunity to benefit from a professional information network. At a later stage, the platform could usefully include lessons learned from experiences, practices, case studies, news, events, testimonies, but also information on regional situations and sharing of professional information (e.g. contacts, calls for collaboration).

The « one stop shop » idea was expressed many times. While it is too ambitious for any initiative to achieve such a result, linking the Encyclopedia with other knowledge sharing initiatives such as ReliefWeb, Sphere, ACAPS, will go some way to having a platform that aggregates the important content and information on the humanitarian community.

Participants also voiced the wish to “constitute a community”, to find a place that allows exchanges and improves the understanding of actors. They expect this space to make them more efficient in the field and to improve the way they do their job.

One main takeaway from the workshops was the importance to produce high quality content first to facilitate understanding and learning before engaging people interactively for data sharing. Also knowing the time constraints of humanitarian practitioners in the field, each concept description needs to be provided in plain English and in a concise and brief manner.
English only? Other languages?

In each workshop a session of about 30 minutes was dedicated to gathering input from participants on how other languages could be addressed in the Encyclopedia. The workshop was conducted in French in Mali, and in Spanish in Mexico. All other workshops were conducted in English. A workshop had been planned in Arabic and Kurdish in Erbil, but this idea was abandoned given the fact that all participants were fluent in English. The discussion was lead along three lines – outlined opposite.

- Relevance of the Humanitarian Encyclopedia if it is in English only, e.g. do we miss concepts which may exist in another language, but not in English
- Accessibility of the Humanitarian Encyclopedia for those who are not fluent in English
- Contributions to the Humanitarian Encyclopedia in other languages

Some of the main outcomes of these discussions are as follows.

It is acceptable to most workshop participants that the Humanitarian Encyclopedia will be initially produced in English. English is the “humanitarian” language and the language mostly used with donors and partners (with the exception of Mali).

A concept should be explained based on the use of the concept in English. The meaning of this concept then needs to be contextualised. This would not necessarily imply a translation of the term/concept, but a translation and contextualisation of the meaning. Once the meaning has been translated, it allows users to find the most appropriate word in the other language. This point was raised across workshops.

Are there terms used in the humanitarian sector in another language not existing in English? As an example, some words are only used in Kiswahili in humanitarian programming, e.g. Bamba chakula for cash transfer for food (used by WFP). In French some concepts do not have the same meaning than in English such as family or household. The term of “villagisation” was mentioned as a specific term in French. In Mexico, on one hand, the specific use of certain terms was mentioned. For example, “unconventional violence” refers to types of violence not considered in International conventions. On the other hand, the term “natural disasters”, still used in English, is no longer accepted in Latin America. In Malay often the English term is used because the translation in Malay is awkward; e.g. translating “resilience” into Malay will not be understandable. It was also noted that the terminology is difficult to translate into Kurdish.

Regarding possible translation, it was highlighted that languages come in different variations (e.g. Arabic, Kiswahili) and that in some countries there are many national languages (e.g. 43 mentioned in India). It was generally agreed that not all content of the Humanitarian Encyclopedia should be translated, but some important parts, the “backbone”. The Humanitarian Encyclopedia could actually empower people if they can contextualise the meaning, translate directly, and contribute their comments and translation on the platform. Language communities must take direct responsibility for translating parts of the
Humanitarian Encyclopedia. This raises issues of quality standards, of local vs. international translators and of funding.

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What comes next?

2019 will be a year of intense production on several fronts behind the “scenes”.

The governance bodies have chosen 20 high-priority concepts, some of which will be piloted in 2019. This will be done by analysing the use of concepts in a large body (corpus) of documents produced in the humanitarian sector. The results will be discussed by scholarly experts who will then complement this linguistic analysis with evidence from their own research.

The top 20

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
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<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
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<td>Resilience</td>
<td>Community</td>
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<td>Localisation</td>
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<td>Participation</td>
<td>Security</td>
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<td>Neutrality</td>
<td>Humanitarian action</td>
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<td>Affected population</td>
<td>Quality</td>
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<td>Crisis</td>
<td>Development</td>
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<td>Vulnerability</td>
<td>Forced displacement</td>
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The online platform will be developed ensuring that it caters to the needs of humanitarian professionals and academics alike. You may be invited as a “super-user” to contribute to the beta version of the platform towards the end of the year. Adopting an agile development methodology allows us to elicit feedback from future users at each stage to ensure the platform corresponds to your needs.

To better grasp the diversity of the sector, a database of about 2,500 humanitarian organizations has been set up by compiling and curating existing lists of humanitarian organizations and identifying additional ones. The organizations included work in an emergency/chronic emergency context and self-define their goals and a substantial part of activities using the following key words: ‘humanitarian’, ‘emergency’, ‘relief’, ‘disaster’, ‘crisis’. Information was collected through websites and activity reports and includes date of creation, organizational type, location of headquarters, location of field operations, types of activities, specific groups on which activities are focused, and whether the organization defines itself as faith-based. The database is now being finalised and will be publicly available in 2019. This opens the possibility for organizations to register and to correct/update their information. This open-source database will be a reference tool of and for humanitarian partners.
For the coming months, we beg for your patience as the Encyclopedia will grow slowly over time, and progress may not be that visible in 2019. However please do check our website for news and events. We may also contact you directly to ask you if you would be willing to provide feedback as a super-user, or to provide your views on some of the concepts that will be piloted and form the first entries of the Humanitarian Encyclopedia.

The phrase ‘Can't see the wood for the trees’ that was used to open this report means that it can often be difficult to find the right information in a forest or sea of language, facts, phrases and concepts. We hope that this project will bring forth the key concepts and encourage common understanding across countries, cultures and settings.

We look forward to updating you again in mid-2019.