



Emergency Response Meta Evaluation

(2017 - 2019)

Executive Summary

November 2020

Introduction

To monitor its performance in emergency responses, Concern has periodically carried out meta evaluations of major emergency operations since 1990, and this is the sixth such report. Unlike the majority of the previous meta evaluations, which covered a period of four years, this meta evaluation covers a three-year period: 2017 – 2019 to better fit in with the reporting cycle to Concern’s Board.

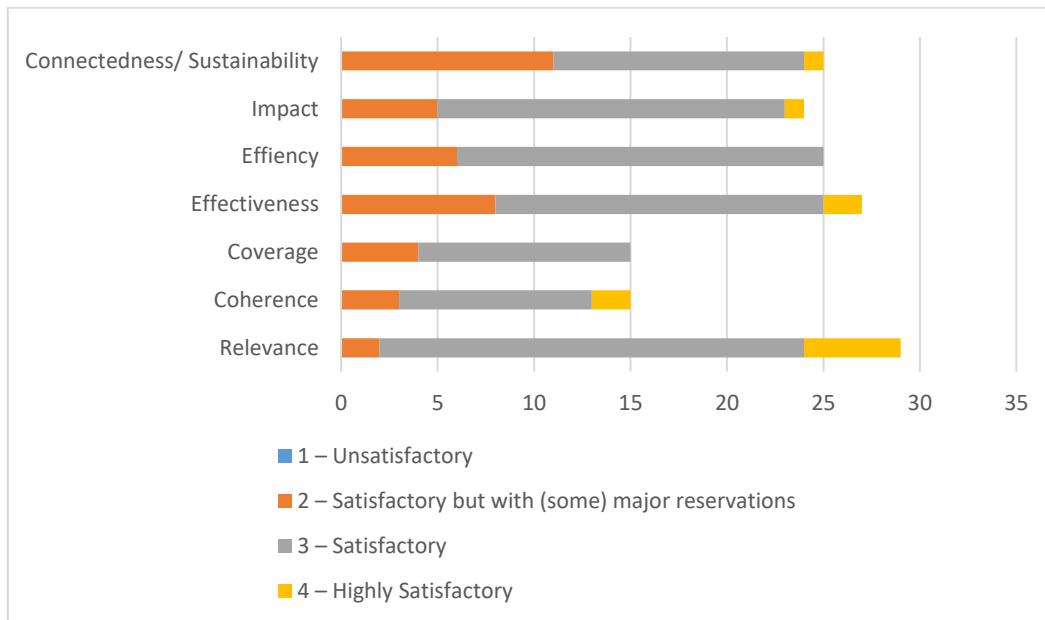
The overall purpose of the meta-evaluation is to critically review Concern’s practice in responding to emergencies, including the nature of our responses, the quality of implementation, and the results achieved by the programmes or projects evaluated against standard criteria.

In total, 34 evaluations from 19 countries were considered. Ten of these countries were in Africa, four in Asia, and five in the Middle East.

Findings and Conclusions

34 evaluations have been reviewed and analysed as part of this meta evaluation. Evaluations were reviewed from programmes delivered in the following countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, CAR, DRC, Ethiopia, Iraq, Kenya, Lebanon, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Turkey, Yemen, and Zambia. Overall, this represents a greater number and better balance of evaluations than was evident in previous meta evaluations.

These evaluations were reviewed for their performance against the extended DAC criteria¹ and concluded that most programmes scored well against most of the criteria:



¹ In 1991, the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD set out broad principles for the evaluation process for DAC members. These principles were refined into five criteria that have been widely used in the evaluation of development initiatives – efficiency, effectiveness, impact, sustainability and relevance (OECD-DAC, 2000). The criteria were subsequently adapted for the evaluation of complex emergencies (OECD-DAC, 1999), becoming a set of seven criteria: relevance/appropriateness, connectedness, coherence, coverage, efficiency, effectiveness, and impact.

As is evident from this table, there has been a quite consideration of the criteria in the evaluations that were reviewed and this issue is taken up in the Challenges and Recommendations section below. However, a summary of the analysis of country programmes' performance against each of these criteria is as follows:

Relevance: Was the most commonly used criterion and all of the interventions evaluated were considered appropriate and relevant. They addressed key humanitarian needs and, where necessary, showed flexibility and a willingness to adapt. This is particularly important when responding to programmes in both sudden-onset and protracted crises, where accessibility can be constrained and programmes can be required to expand into new areas as more communities become accessible. In the majority of the responses evaluated, internal needs assessments, surveys or external reports were used at the design stage and the communities targeted largely felt that their needs were met sufficiently. It is clear that Concern teams have put significant efforts into setting up effective Complaints and Response Mechanisms (CRMs), but there is still room for improvement in the effective design and utilisation of these. Community participation could be strengthened, particularly in the design phase of the projects.

Coherence: Despite not being consistently used in the evaluations reviewed, overall there was satisfactory coherence shown in Concern's programmes. The majority of the programmes reviewed against this criterion adhered to Concern's Approach to Emergencies paper and reported that staff have been trained on protection, the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), and the humanitarian principles. When looking at the Preparing for Effective Emergency Response (PEER) plans, it clearly emerges that considerable work has been done at country level on this, but that there is a need to improve the implementation and operationalisation of PEER in some countries, with a particular focus on those facing protracted crises and those more exposed to natural disasters.

Coverage: Overall, Concern's emergency responses are considered satisfactory in terms of coverage. The majority of the projects evaluated were implemented in areas with levels of vulnerability and a relatively low presence of humanitarian actors. Insecurity is a significant factor that needs to be taken into account but, as highlighted in the meta-evaluation of the HPP programmes, Concern has been courageous in selecting areas of operations and has measures in place to help to ensure the security of its staff. In line with its mandate and strategy, Concern has demonstrated a commitment to reaching those most in need in the hardest to reach areas, with particular attention given to the most vulnerable, including children, people with disabilities, and women. In most projects where it has been necessary to select participants in the response, communities were involved in the targeting process. However, a number of evaluations recommended the need to strengthen targeting criteria and communications around them with the communities.

Efficiency: Overall, Concern's emergency responses are considered satisfactory in terms of efficiency. The majority of the projects were considered to be cost-effective. Logistics and procurement systems were found to be strong, and while some delays were reported, these were mainly due to external factors linked to the difficult operational environments in which Concern works. On the programme side, one of the challenges highlighted was the absence or limited use of programme management toolkits. Issues of effective project management were also found in relation to expenditure allocation. The biggest challenge around staffing continues to be the high level of turn-over and staffing gaps. However, it is also important to acknowledge the capacity of some country offices to undertake restructuring processes to address these issues, and that doing so has led to an improvement of the

staffing environment over time. Other challenges related to staffing are due to difficulties in hiring staff for remote and hardship posting areas. A very positive note shared in a number of evaluations is the praise for Concern's staff dedication and commitment to their jobs, especially among national staff.

Effectiveness: Overall, the majority of the programmes evaluated were timely and effective in reaching their targets. In numerous cases, information from assessments and M&E activities were used to make adjustments. This is particularly important considering the volatile nature of emergencies, particularly in contexts of protracted crisis, but also in the aftermath of a natural disaster where information from rapid assessments is constantly reviewed and updated. Some of the challenges faced in relation to the effectiveness of Concern's responses are mainly related to **programme design**. As noted above, the timing of some evaluations relative to the programme cycle resulted in some challenges in relation to being able to demonstrate achievements against the planned output and outcomes, with a concern raised that some **outcomes were still at risk of not being achieved**. In terms of external coordination, Concern has consistently put significant efforts into coordinating with relevant clusters and partners, as well as with local authorities. This effort has been consistently recognised across the countries in which Concern has a presence and has strengthened Concern's ability to influence the responses in which it is an active member.

Impact: The majority of the evaluations reported the responses to have had a positive impact on beneficiaries. The increase in the level of employment among beneficiaries as a direct result of the projects implemented has been highlighted. A number of projects implementing cash programming have been considered to have boosted economic empowerment in the communities in which the projects were implemented. There were not a lot of unintended impacts mentioned; but, the issue of aid dependency was highlighted in some evaluations. While this is mostly linked to the contexts in which Concern operates, it is important to highlight the need to challenge any long-standing reliance on aid wherever this is possible.

Connectedness and Sustainability: Consistent with the extended DAC criteria, the Approach to Emergency paper and the Evaluating Concern's Emergency Responses guidelines² recommend the use of connectedness rather than sustainability, but the evaluations reviewed presented a mix of the two. When reviewing responses against the sustainability criterion, the evaluations assessed raised more reservations. In fact, this criterion is the one that scored lowest across all of the criteria considered. However, some of these comments related to the inherently unsustainable nature of the operating context – usually as a result of conflict. In terms of connectedness, the overall analysis changes, and the assessment leans towards the majority of the evaluations being considered Satisfactory. A number of examples of the introduction of medium-term thinking in the emergency response implemented were reported in the evaluations reviewed.

Cross-cutting Issues: When reviewing the 34 evaluations of emergency responses, only 9 evaluations (27% of the total) covered cross-cutting issues in separate sections, making it difficult to come to any real conclusions as to the degree to which, organisationally, Concern was considering these issues.

²<https://concern2com.sharepoint.com/:b/r/sites/Emergency/Core%20Documents/Emergency%20evaluations%20and%20meta-evaluations/Evaluating%20Concern%27s%20Emergency%20Responses%20-%20March%202019%20.pdf?csf=1&web=1&e=rv6VnP>

Overall, the principles of *Protection* have been incorporated into the majority of the programmes analysed against this cross-cutting issue. In those evaluations that reported against it, the comments of the evaluators were generally positive. There seems, for example, to be a good integration of protection principles in the WASH components of emergency responses, and when conducting distribution of NFIs or cash-based interventions (CBIs).

When evaluating *gender*, the evaluators' comments were again generally positive, although there remains room for improvement. It is recognised that it is not always easy to achieve a gender balance among Concern staff, but evaluators praised the efforts Concern was making to address this issue across its programmes. In terms of NFI assistance, when the intervention was looked at from an equality point of view, as it was the case in the DRC, it was noted that NFIs were adapted to the specific needs of women and girls. In the DRC, evaluators also greatly appreciated the involvement of women in the same cash for work (CFW) activities as men.

Partnership: Only 30% of the emergency responses reviewed for this meta-evaluation were delivered through local or national partners. Moreover, Concern's expenditure allocated to national and local partners in emergencies has dropped from 13% of Concern's emergency budget in 2015, to 5% in 2019³. Those evaluations that considered our work with local partners suggested that the partners' major challenges were in relation to inadequate financial and human resource systems and policies.

Challenges and Recommendations

Evaluation Process Overview:

1. While the value and importance of evaluating emergency responses is recognised across the organisation, **the majority of emergency responses have not been evaluated** in this review period and, of these, only 21% included **management responses to the recommendations**. More work and a greater commitment are necessary to ensure that all emergency responses are evaluated in a timely manner. To improve the percentage of emergency responses evaluated, it is recommended that Emergency Directorate should take on an active role in monitoring the evaluations of emergency responses conducted on a yearly basis, with the commitment to lead on a limited number (no more than three) evaluations of large scale responses per year. We also need to see a consistent completion of management responses to evaluations reports.
2. An analysis of the list of 213 emergency responses reported in the annual reports was outside of the scope of this work. However, while reviewing the emergency responses of 2019, inconsistencies can be noted in the way that emergencies were listed. Some countries reported emergencies by grant (e.g. Sudan, Bangladesh), others by single event (e.g. Afghanistan), and others by their underlining cause (e.g. Chad, Syria). In Afghanistan, for example, the country initially reported having responded to 26 emergencies in 2019, classifying these by event and by Concern's response to it. However, the high number of emergencies listed in 2019 APPR initial draft and the low number of beneficiaries reported per emergency, led to a reassessment of the list, resulting in a reduction in number of reported emergency responses to nine. Syria chose a

³ This includes both national and international partners. Financial data are available in Concern Annual Reports: <https://www.concern.net/accountability/annual-reports>

different approach and classified all events and grants related to the conflict by its cause, resulting in one overall emergency, i.e. “conflict”. In Bangladesh, the team classified the emergency responses by grant and reported to have responded to nine emergencies. **The categorisation criteria of the APPR should be reviewed** to ensure better consistency of the data provided and, consequently, the number of evaluations completed of these responses.

3. There is still a degree of **inconsistency in the DAC criteria used** to conduct evaluations of emergency responses, and in terms of the **grading systems** used to score them. While this seems to have been addressed in the evaluations conducted by Concern staff, it remains an area of challenge for the evaluations conducted by external consultants. The Evaluating Concern’s Emergency Response document, introduced in 2018, recommends the use of a scoring system that goes from 0 to 4, and this scoring system should be used to ensure consistency in the scoring of future emergency response evaluations. Moreover, to ensure a greater level of consistency in the application of these guidelines, it is recommended that the Humanitarian Adviser in the Emergency Directorate contributes to the review of the TORs for evaluations of humanitarian programmes before they are signed off by the Regional Directors.
4. However, in the medium term, consideration should be given across the organisation to reviewing this scoring system. It is unclear if a five point scoring system allows sufficient nuance of the relative degree to which programmes have sought to adhere to the extended DAC criteria, or to which they are making incremental improvement in relation to this over time.
5. Consistent with the extended DAC principles, the Approach to Emergency paper and the Evaluating Concern’s Emergency Responses guidelines, recommend the use of the broader criterion of **connectedness rather than sustainability** but, as noted, the evaluations reviewed present a mix of the two. It is recommended that all Concern evaluations use the extended DAC criteria, including the Connectedness criterion.
6. A very limited number of evaluations included separate sections on **cross-cutting issues**. While it is recognised that not every evaluation needs to include every cross-cutting theme, it is important to keep in mind that evaluations offer an excellent tool to assess the organisation’s capacity to mainstream protection, DRR and gender issues.

Programmes Overview:

- 1 In terms of accountability to beneficiaries, Concern teams have put significant efforts into setting up **effective CRMs**. However, there are still some issues that need to be addressed for the CRMs to be widely understood by and accessible to beneficiaries. The recent investigation of sexual abuses perpetrated by aid workers during the Ebola response in the DRC⁴ reminds us of the importance of this tool and of the need of continuous work to improve its efficacy. More work needs to be done to ensure that the channels of communication used for CRMs are appropriate to and usable by targeted beneficiaries, and to improve knowledge around CRMs by some of the

⁴ <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/2020/09/29/exclusive-more-50-women-accuse-aid-workers-sex-abuse-congo-ebola-crisis>

beneficiary groups targeted through Concern's emergency responses. More consideration also needs to be given to ensuring that project participants at the field level are aware of Concern's CRM processes and to ensure that they know how, and about what, they can make complaints. CRMs need to be adjusted and tailored to meet communities' access needs, including those of beneficiaries who are illiterate, to ensure full and uncompromised access to the CRM.

- 2 **Staffing** continues to be identified as a challenge in terms of staff turn-over and gaps in key positions, especially in the first phases of the response. It is important to recognise that this will continue to be difficult to address in rapid onset emergencies, where the length of deployment of international staff has to take account of the need of shorter rotations to allow staff to recuperate after an intense period of work. However, good information management systems and a robust handover process can ensure a smoother transition between staff and avoid gaps in institutional knowledge. In countries dealing with protracted humanitarian crises, an increased investment in national staff and capacity building can help reduce this challenge - and this is something that is being actively pursued by some countries. A continuous investment in capacity building of national staff is recommended; in countries dealing with protracted humanitarian crises or that are prone to natural disasters, particular focus should be given to identifying and training national staff who could be redeployed in-country to respond to emergency spikes when necessary. This will help decrease the need to deploy international staff for short periods of time and will help the organisation to fill staff gaps, in particular in the first phase of an emergency response.
- 3 In our programming, we seek to ensure that there is a level of consistency and integration in the way in which we understand and respond to issues of risk and vulnerability, and address the patterns of recurrent or predictable disasters⁵. Consistent with this, the work that the country teams do in terms of emergency preparedness and the extent to which **PEER plans** are developed and used by country programmes are key. Considerable work has been done at country level on this, but there is a need to improve the implementation and operationalisation of PEER plans in some countries, with a particular focus on those facing protracted crises and those more exposed to natural disasters. The yearly review of PEER work plans needs to be strengthened to ensure that work plans are effectively integrated into countries' emergency structures and well understood by staff. The Emergency Directorate, through the DRR Adviser, should continue to take the lead on this by supporting the collection and review of PEER work plans on an annual basis in an effort to ensure integration of lessons to be learned, and provide technical support where necessary.
- 4 **Training on humanitarian principles and standards** were conducted in several of the programmes reviewed. Going forward, considering the high turnover of national and international staff in countries implementing humanitarian responses, it is recommended to continue to conduct **refresher humanitarian training** on a regular basis.
- 5 In terms of investment in **local partners**, the changing profile of Concern's countries of operation may have contributed to the organisation finding a decreasing number of credible local partners

⁵ Concern Worldwide's Approach to Emergencies

to work with. However, when these partnerships are in place, there is a need to strengthen the focus on capacity building, as highlighted in a number of evaluations. Strengthening a country programme team's partnership management capacity by having a dedicated person, preferably a national staff member, in charge of managing partnerships is recommended. This will ease communication, facilitate the prioritisation of capacity building needs, and strengthen the working relationship between Concern and its local partners.