The role of evidence in humanitarian decision-making

Jennifer Leaning

Director of the Francois-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights, Harvard, USA

Email: jleaning@hsph.harvard.edu

Summary

Academic and policy communities in the last several years have argued that greater priority be given to developing an adequate evidence base for delivery of humanitarian aid. A particular concern relates to the quantity and quality of evidence used in determining the need for what have become routinely deployed public health assessments and interventions.

Much of this expressed concern is probably warranted, particularly when viewed across the range of humanitarian actors. Perhaps, however, another conversation is even more in order. Many factors, long identified but worth revisiting in this turbulent era, entangle humanitarian decision-makers at fundamental levels of strategy, ethics, and politics. Medical care and public health in humanitarian settings are at the vortex of these entanglements. This presentation argues that greater clarity on these policy and normative levels, articulated precisely for different kinds of engagement in different contexts, would improve humanitarian decision-making at many levels. Examples will be drawn from current and recent humanitarian responses with major public health components.