



Real-time humanitarian evaluations

*Some frequently asked
questions*

Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit

UNHCR's Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit (EPAU) is committed to the systematic examination and assessment of UNHCR policies, programmes, projects and practices. EPAU also promotes rigorous research on issues related to the work of UNHCR and encourages an active exchange of ideas and information between humanitarian practitioners, policymakers and the research community. All of these activities are undertaken with the purpose of strengthening UNHCR's operational effectiveness, thereby enhancing the organization's capacity to fulfil its mandate on behalf of refugees and other displaced people. The work of the unit is guided by the principles of transparency, independence, consultation and relevance.

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Introduction

1. The notion of evaluating emergency operations in 'real-time' has recently gained ground at UNHCR, and in the wider humanitarian world. This short paper attempts to answer some frequently asked questions regarding real-time evaluations, based on UNHCR's experience in this area to date.

2. By their very nature, real-time evaluations require flexibility. The approach described in this document should consequently be regarded as a starting point, to be adapted as circumstances dictate. Although the lessons the document identifies are derived from - and to a large extent targeted at - UNHCR, other agencies involved in emergency humanitarian operations may also be able to benefit from it.

What is a real-time evaluation?

3. A real-time evaluation (RTE) is a timely, rapid and interactive peer review of a fast evolving humanitarian operation (usually an emergency) undertaken at an early phase. Its broad objective is to gauge the effectiveness and impact of a given UNHCR response, and to ensure that its findings are used as an immediate catalyst for organizational and operational change.

4. It is neither a judgement from on high nor a technical assessment, but a potentially powerful and dynamic management tool that takes a wide angle snapshot of a situation and allows UNHCR to assess and adjust its response. By means of the real-time evaluation, UNHCR also hopes to reinforce the link between operations, evaluation and policy formulation.

5. An RTE should not be viewed as an abbreviated and rapid version of a conventional humanitarian evaluation. While they share some general objectives, an RTE is different in the sense that it is interactive, and is intended to provide immediate inputs into an on-going operation.

6. In line with UNHCR evaluation policy, RTE findings are disseminated in the public domain by means of debriefings and publication of the written products.

What are the advantages of an RTE?

7. The advantages of the RTE can be summarized in three words: timeliness, perspective and interactivity.

8. *Timeliness:* As its name suggests, a real-time evaluation is undertaken in the early phase of an operation, at a time when key operational and policy decisions are being taken. While they do not enjoy the more generous timeframe of a traditional evaluation, their findings are made available quickly, to a wide range of stakeholders, and in time to make a difference to an unfolding operation.

9. *Interactivity:* The RTE format is interactive in that sense that real-time evaluators are directly involved in the emergency planning process. They are also engaged in a sustained dialogue with emergency staff, both in the field and at Headquarters.

10. *Perspective:* A real-time evaluator is able to approach an emergency from a number of different angles. He or she should be a repository of knowledge on lessons from past emergency evaluations, and should incorporate such knowledge into the evaluation process and outputs. The evaluator is able to view the situation from a number of vantage points – Headquarters, country of asylum (capital and field) and possibly regional centres and the country of origin – thereby enabling a richer and more informed evaluation.

What should an RTE evaluate?

11. In general, an RTE will look at the effectiveness of a UNHCR emergency response, the efficiency with which it is being implemented and the impact it has upon its intended beneficiaries. It will examine both programmes and policies. Whereas conventional evaluations tend to look at specific situations and draw general conclusions, RTEs will reverse this process somewhat: the RTE team will be aware of such general lessons, and will seek to assess their relevance to specific situations.

12. An RTE should be able to analyse an emergency response on the basis of a number of benchmarks, including UNHCR's protection mandate, policy statements, sectoral and thematic guidelines, the standards set out in the organization's *Emergency Handbook* and the specific objectives of the operation in question.

13. While its focus will necessarily be on UNHCR, it should also take account of a wider range of actors: national and local authorities, other UN agencies, NGOs and local populations. Of critical importance are the intended beneficiaries of the emergency operation; an RTE should assess the extent to which the displaced feel that their needs are being met and their opinions considered.

14. Humanitarian evaluations have an inevitable tendency to focus on activities and issues which are proving problematic. While an RTE will seek to analyse such difficulties and find effective responses to them, it will also actively seek out initiatives and practices that work well. These examples of good practice should be captured, and used in UNHCR's planning, programming and training activities.

When should an RTE be undertaken?

15. For its findings to be timely and usable, an RTE should be launched as soon as a new emergency has occurred or appears to be imminent. Initially, the evaluators will be active participants in the crisis cell established for the emergency, collecting and reviewing relevant documentation on a systematic basis.

16. At this stage, the evaluation team will also undertake interviews with senior managers and establish contact with key offices and personnel in the field. The evaluators' role at this stage is not simply a passive or analytical one. On the basis of their involvement in the operation, and drawing upon lessons learned from previous emergencies, real-time evaluators are well placed to provide advice to emergency managers and to alert them to impending problems.

17. While an RTE should be initiated as quickly as possible in an actual or imminent emergency, real-time evaluators should not necessarily be deployed to the field at once. Indeed, the real-time evaluators' presence is likely to prove more

useful (and less disruptive for other staff) between four and six weeks after the launch of an emergency operation.

Who should undertake an RTE?

18. A real-time evaluator should be familiar with emergency operations and evaluation methodologies. The evaluator must also be available for extensive pre- and post-mission discussions and activities.

19. While external participation in a real-time evaluation should not be excluded, the team leader will ideally be a UNHCR staff member, normally but not necessarily from the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, or someone who has worked closely with the agency.

20. Such an arrangement has two important advantages: it enables the team leader to have an immediate grasp of UNHCR's mandate, structures and procedures; and it helps to foster a climate of trust and close cooperation with operational staff. In many respects, a real-time 'evaluator' is actually a 'facilitator', encouraging and assisting field personnel, both individually and collectively, to take a critical look at their operation and to find creative solutions to any difficulties they are encountering.

What outputs can be expected from an RTE?

21. The findings and recommendations of a real-time evaluation are communicated openly, quickly and creatively to all of UNHCR's stakeholders.

22. Before leaving a field location, the evaluation team holds an interactive debriefing with UNHCR staff and, if possible, with representatives of partner organizations. As soon as possible after returning to UNHCR Headquarters, debriefings are also provided to the High Commissioner and other members of senior management, to Executive Committee members and to NGOs.

23. With conventional evaluations, there is frequently a considerable time-lag between the completion of a field mission and the publication of an evaluation report. A primary purpose of the real-time evaluation is to avoid such delays and to ensure that the findings and recommendations of the team are placed in the public domain in the shortest possible time.

24. To facilitate this task, UNHCR has found it useful to produce real-time evaluation bulletins, which are modest in length (between 10 and 15 pages), which focus on the current situation, and which present findings and recommendations that are of immediate utility to operations managers and field staff. While real-time evaluations may not be conducive to a lengthy process of post-mission consultation, the draft of such bulletins should be circulated to key staff in the field and at headquarters, with a very tight deadline for the submission of comments.

25. The publication of real-time evaluation bulletins does not, of course, preclude the preparation of other outputs. Information and analysis derived from a real-time evaluation may be used as the basis of a longer and more conventional

evaluation report, fed into other evaluation projects, used as the basis for a workshop, or incorporated in emergency training courses and manuals.

What experience does UNHCR have with RTEs?

26. The real-time evaluation concept has been in existence for some time in UNHCR. Indeed, a conventional 1992 evaluation of the Persian Gulf crisis recommended that UNHCR take a more systematic approach to evaluating emergency operations through undertaking operational reviews 'in the initial phase of the operation by UNHCR staff members and consultants who are not burdened with operational responsibilities.'¹

27. The issue of real-time evaluations received a new impetus during the 1999 Kosovo operation, in which UNHCR's performance was the subject of considerable criticism. In the wake of that emergency, a UNHCR emergency plan of action recommended that UNHCR 'Introduce real-time evaluations in order to be able to undertake rapid, analytical evaluations of ongoing emergencies, and provide suggestions for improvement, as appropriate, while they can still make a difference.'²

28. In accordance with this recommendation, in June 2000, the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit (EPAU) issued a provisional framework for real-time emergency evaluations. Shortly thereafter the unit undertook an RTE to the Sudan/Eritrea emergency. Since that time, UNHCR has since undertaken three more RTE missions: to Angola (2000), Pakistan (2001), Iran and Afghanistan (2002). A further RTE to Afghanistan will also be undertaken later in 2002.

How should an RTE be undertaken?

29. An RTE involves extensive interviews, travel, observation and documentary research. These must be effected rapidly while avoiding superficiality. In addition, the RTE team will be engaged in a constant dialogue with the various actors at each location, including Headquarters: participating in relevant meetings; gathering information from them; informing them of developments and viewpoints from other areas (e.g. explaining 'Geneva' policies to the 'deep field'); and comparing the responses of different entities within the organization. The RTE team is also expected to spend as much time as possible with beneficiary and local populations.

30. The exact form taken by an RTE will vary from situation to situation. For example, some emergencies may require larger teams, while others may need only one evaluator. Some may involve repeat visits to the region to examine different issues (emergency response, repatriation and reintegration, for example). Others may place more emphasis on learning in the field, while yet others might be targeted at senior management.

¹ J. Crisp, et al, *Review of UNHCR emergency preparedness and response in the Persian Gulf crisis* (GULF/EVAL/12, Rev. 1), UNHCR Geneva, March 1992.

² 'Plan of action – strengthening UNHCR's capacity for emergency preparedness and response,' e-mail from the Assistant High Commissioner, Søren Jessen-Petersen, 26 May 2000.

Should RTEs be restricted to emergency operations?

31. RTEs and emergencies make a good fit; there is a clear logic in applying a rapid evaluation methodology to a rapidly evolving situation. As such, RTEs at UNHCR have, and will continue to focus on emergencies. However, this does not preclude the deployment of RTEs to non-emergency operations that might require snapshot analyses and the timely dissemination of findings and recommendations.

What are the limitations of the RTE?

32. Recent experience in UNHCR has demonstrated that real-time evaluations have many advantages in terms of speed, impact and partnerships. Within the organization, the RTE concept has quickly become accepted by managers and staff at all levels. Amongst UNHCR's key external stakeholders (donor states, NGOs and other UN agencies) the introduction of RTEs has been welcomed as an indication of the organization's commitment to transparency, operational effectiveness and the innovative use of the evaluation function.

33. There are, however, some dangers and limitations associated with RTEs - not the least the growing tendency for humanitarian organizations to describe any evaluation as 'real-time', in order to exploit the new popularity of this concept. In addition, a number of other difficulties can be cited: the difficulty of using external consultants for RTEs, and the pressure which this places on the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit; the limited time available for consultation with beneficiary populations; the narrow focus upon UNHCR's own operations and the consequent absence of a system-wide perspective; and the risks of placing controversial findings in the public domain at a time when UNHCR is engaged in delicate negotiations with states and other actors.

34. Despite these limitations, UNHCR has found real-time evaluations to be a valuable new tool. The organization will continue to undertake RTEs, to develop the RTE methodology, and to share its experience in this area with other partner organizations.

Annex

A real-time evaluation in practice – sample itinerary and activities

Preparedness phase

- Designation of internal RTE focal points (on stand-by).
- Inclusion of the focal point(s) in relevant pre-alert task force meetings and correspondence lists.

Incipient emergency phase (pre-deployment) (weeks one through six)

- Inclusion of focal point in emergency situation planning, including the crisis cell.
- The focal points begin interviewing Headquarters-based stakeholders and collecting and reviewing pertinent documents.
- Drawing upon initial findings, and guided by previous emergency evaluations, the focal points may produce an initial bulletin on the state of preparedness, planning and decision-making.
- Decision taken on whether to activate RTE (based, *inter alia*, on size of emergency and complexity of the situation).

Emergency phase (deployment)

- The team's itinerary should include visits to UNHCR offices and major refugee sites the country of asylum; in addition, other locations -- such as the country of origin, secondary country of asylum, regional offices, other Headquarters (New York, Rome) – may be added to the itinerary.
- At each stop, the RTE mission will inform the team leader of its brief, and together identify some of the pressing issues to be looked into. The evaluation team will then immerse itself in the situation by undertaking field visits and interviewing relevant actors, including UNHCR personnel, refugees, implementing partners, government officials, UN and ICRC staff, local populations and civil society, and others.
- While in the emergency area, the RTE team will convene debriefings with the UNHCR emergency team and, if relevant, other stakeholders. A 'first findings' report should be presented and debated at this point. Detailed recommendations of interest to the field, but perhaps not to a wider audience, should also be debated at this point.

Emergency (post-deployment)

- Within four days of the team's arrival in Geneva, it should provide a debriefing to senior UNHCR management, and present a revised version of the initial report.

- External stakeholders, such as permanent missions in Geneva, UN agencies and NGOs, should also be briefed soon after the mission's return.
- A longer bulletin, that accounts for comments made during the debriefings, should be prepared and circulated for comments within two weeks of the mission's completion.
- A final RTE bulletin will be prepared based on comments received, and disseminated widely, including on the EPAU web-page.
- If merited, subsequent evaluations of the emergency will be undertaken.