

## Time for Real-Time Reviews

### Note of the HERE-organised consultation on real-time evaluations, Geneva, 28 September 2018

This Note provides a summary of a three-hour policy-consultation among humanitarian practitioners, donor government representatives, and independent experts on the current situation with regards to real-time evaluations (RTEs) in the humanitarian sector. It also provides a number of reflections on behalf of HERE on the discussions and the way forward.

### Summary of the discussion

Following four questions (see Annex 1) raised in the invitation, the meeting explored the added value of RTEs, their scope and timing, ownership, and the link to broader policy discussions.

#### Added value

The humanitarian community does not lack tools to gather situational evidence, be they instruments to assess needs, monitor progress, or report results. RTEs have been part of this toolbox too, but it appears that RTEs that review collective performance have fallen off the humanitarian agenda.<sup>1</sup> The discussion clarified that there is no hierarchy between these different tools, but that it is simply a matter of choosing the one that best fits the intended purpose. Real-time evaluations are especially helpful for making course-corrections in ongoing operations. By identifying the blind-spots of a response early on, an RTE is able to highlight what needs to be changed before an operation is so deeply installed that it is impossible to shift.

Participants also noted that different from data gathering or monitoring tools, RTEs essentially carry a challenge-function, i.e. they highlight whether the right things are done, rather than simply evaluating how these things are done. Another important feature of RTEs is that they are a participatory effort aimed primarily at knowledge gathering and learning, benefitting from an external perspective.

#### Scope and timing

With regards to scope and timing, participants offered a range of insights based on their experiences. First, a shared experience is that RTEs often become too large in scope, especially when there are multiple stakeholders involved. The terms of reference may become a panoply of questions which can impossibly be investigated in the short amount of time provided in view of the aim of a “real-time” analysis. Similarly, RTE questions also risk becoming too detailed, which makes the process of answering them heavy and slow, i.e. precisely the opposite of what a review in real-time by nature is supposed to be. Participants therefore agreed that the scope of the RTE needs to be restrained, both in terms of the range of evaluation questions included, and the level of analysis sought.

On the issue of the level of analysis sought, there are differences between an RTE undertaken within one organisation and one that is commissioned at the inter-agency level (e.g. the Inter-Agency Standing Committee - IASC). Participants highlighted pros and cons with both types of RTEs: while the collective exercise has the benefit of buy-in from several agencies, it can also be more difficult to ensure that the final product is focused and that the feedback loop does not become the product of compromise. The individual agency RTE could on the other hand be easier to define and look at more specific, operational issues. Arguably, it would be more difficult for an individual agency to commission an RTE that would provide system-wide insights that can enable a strategic dialogue at the inter-agency level or between

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<sup>1</sup> The terms of real-time evaluations and real-time reviews were used inter-changeably at the meeting. RTEs are understood to follow specific criteria, have a clear purpose, and are undertaken by independent evaluators.

donors and organisations. This is particularly important in view of the challenge-function of RTEs, and the argument that they should specifically focus on the issue of whether a response as a whole is relevant. Generally, it appears that there is room for better links between the RTE conducted by an individual agency, and those that are conducted at the inter-agency or collective level.

In terms of timing, it was noted that few RTEs are in fact carried out in real time. Many are done too late as (operational) staff are (said to be) too busy in the early stages of an emergency and do not want to be 'bothered' by evaluators. Between three and six months into a response was given by participants as an appropriate goal-post for an RTE. On this point, it was mentioned however that while this would work for example in cases of natural disasters, it cannot be easily applied in protracted settings where there is no "day one" of the response. In such situations, it was agreed that it is not necessarily possible to set a list of criteria for when it is appropriate to carry out an RTE. A sudden change in circumstances might be one trigger. Another one would be a general reflection specially at the country level (e.g. in the context of the humanitarian country team), that an RTE would be helpful to the humanitarian community in relation to their strategy and/or desire for an outside perspective to learn and adjust.

### **Ownership**

The purpose of the RTE is defined by its ownership, and the participants discussed at length for whom they are ultimately carried out: the donors who sponsor them, the agencies that commission them (i.e. especially those that manage operations), the staff on the ground who carry out the activities, or the population that is affected by these activities. While the affected populations are the ultimate "clients", they are not the ones paying for or commissioning the work. One issue highlighted in this context is that there is no systematic narrative of what the humanitarian community attempts to do in the first place, which makes it difficult to see where and how to absorb any feedback on overall performance. Perhaps, as was noted, the question is not so much who the RTE is carried out for, but how it is carried out to serve the affected population, and how well the humanitarian community aligns behind the exercise.

Ownership is also linked to the question of who commissions the RTE. The commissioning agency can lend power and credibility to the exercise, which not only makes it easier to carry it out, but which also helps to feed the results back into the system. It was highlighted during the meeting that it could be beneficial if it was the government of the crisis-affected country that would commission RTE. While this would seem possible in a natural disaster setting—provided the necessary capacity and willingness on behalf of the government—it becomes a much more complex issue in politicised situations of (protracted) conflict.

As humanitarian staff on the ground are stakeholders too, the voluntary character of RTEs was also raised during the consultation. Experiences at the inter-agency level with the Peer 2 Peer mechanism suggest that there is more appetite for reviews when they steer away from a "finger-pointing" exercise. Likewise, RTEs looking at collective performance are not an exercise by which to identify the best (and worst) performer(s). Yet, an RTE should be distinguished from an externally assisted self-assessment or after-action review. As such, the discussion turned to the careful balance to be drawn between the objectives of accountability and learning.

### **Link to broader policy discussions**

There was general agreement in the room that the results from RTEs often tend to remain within the agency/agencies that commissioned them, that they are not fed to appropriate bodies or forums, and that there is little dialogue across the broader humanitarian community in relation to findings. It was questioned in this regard whether the humanitarian community has the necessary mechanisms to

receive the feedback that RTEs can provide. The IASC is one (obvious) forum, but, as result of experiences with too heavy RTEs, it has stopped commissioning them. Moreover, the IASC does not involve the donors.

In this context, the system-wide RTE, involving donors, in relation to the response of hurricane Matthew in Haiti in November 2016 was noted as an innovation, but it met with opposition at the time from one organisation who criticised the initiative for using the Grand Bargain as the analytical framework. One opportunity for a conversation around RTE findings would be at the mid-term review of Humanitarian Response Plans. In this light, it was pointed out that it would be in the clear interest of collective bodies to commission RTEs, to address overall issues that all should feel responsible for. There may also be differences among donors in terms of how they use RTE findings in their relations with the agencies. Some may use it to address immediate performance issues in a specific country, while other donors would prefer using RTE findings to feed into wider policy debates.

### HERE's reflections on the outcome of the consultation

In line with its mission, HERE argues that a review in real-time can shine a concrete light on the gap between commitments and practical implementation, by flagging issues that require more recognition and action. HERE's initiative in organising this RTE consultation appeared as timely. Not only does it provide helpful insights to HERE for its new (2019-2021) strategy, but, more importantly, it also suggests that there remains a significant level of collective interest in using RTEs as a tool for improving humanitarian responses in real time.

Somewhat confusing perhaps is the mix in the discussion of RTEs that are undertaken within individual organisations and those that take place at the inter-agency level and look at collective performance. Those that are taken within organisations should also look at collective challenges given the general inter-dependence in the humanitarian community. Those that look at collective performance should build on reviews that individual organisations undertake, where they are available. For this to happen, individual agency RTEs should be shared within the humanitarian community. RTEs looking at collective performance should work towards course-correction and identify policy or strategic issues at the system level.

This latter aspect points to the need for existing inter-agency and donor forums to be used to digest RTE findings, not necessarily to discuss a specific country or crisis context, but to ensure that policy discussions, be it in the IASC, GHD-initiative, ODSG, or Grand Bargain context, are linked to the reality on the ground. This is also in the interest of the donor community, regardless of their different approaches to funding partners and monitoring performance. The idea raised at the meeting to connect RTEs with mid-term reviews of humanitarian response plans merits further consideration.

RTEs, especially collective ones, are not meant to point fingers at one particular actor, but to take stock of the state of a response and offer operational staff a moment for reflection on the impact of their work. By their nature they look at qualitative issues and gaps, which are (sadly) often found in activity areas related to protection, gender, and GBV. HERE will continue to promote RTEs as a cost-effective, complementary measure for humanitarian quality assurance and look at policy bodies such as the IASC and donor forums for commissioning RTEs. NGO appeal bodies such as the DEC or Swiss Solidarity can also play a welcome role in this regard as they are among the few actors commissioning RTEs looking at collective performance. ALNAP can also play a pivotal role by developing a stronger link between collective RTEs and its state of the system reports.

## Annex 1

### Concept Note for the Meeting

Over the past two decades, Real-Time Evaluations (RTEs) have emerged as a flexible, resource-efficient, and learning-focused means to empower humanitarian response. They are generally undertaken at an early phase of an operation, either by an individual agency/actor or collectively by a group of agencies/actors, at a time when there is a need for further evidence to inform key operational and policy decisions.

In line with its mission, HERE argues that a review in real-time can shine a concrete light on the gap between commitments and practical implementation. RTEs can flag issues that need (more) recognition and action. An RTE is an improvement-oriented review, where the emphasis is on the process and learning, and the possibility of making timely course-corrections. Significantly, it would appear that an RTE – or a Real-Time Review (RTR) as it can be called to further emphasise its difference with a standard (summative or formative) evaluation – can be used to look beyond whether things are done rightly, to better understand whether the humanitarian community as such is doing the right thing.

Through this discussion, HERE hopes to further explore the assumption that Real-Time Reviews have a valuable role to play in the humanitarian system, particularly in view of their potential to allow for a reality-check of collective performance.

Participants will be asked to reflect on issues, such as:

1. Who is interested in Real-Time Reviews around collective performance? What would their scope and ownership look like?
2. When to carry and when not to carry out an RTR?
3. In view of the already existing amount of data collection and reporting, what is the added value of an RTR? What balance can be drawn between accountability and learning? What are the challenges and opportunities?
4. How can RTRs be used for broader policy discussions?