# REPORT SUMMARY: research methodologies in humanitarian crises

## BACKGROUND: ABOUT THE REPORT

In order to best respond to the needs of people affected by humanitarian crises, research in humanitarian settings is increasingly recognised as a valuable endeavour.

The evidence base that informs humanitarian response has received increased attention in recent years[[1]](#footnote-1), with a greater awareness and appreciation of evidence-informed humanitarian programming amongst donors and implementing organisations helping shape the humanitarian research landscape. But, despite this appreciation of the value of research in humanitarian crises, the inherent dynamism and unpredictability of certain contexts, combined with numerous implementation challenges, have made it difficult to bridge knowledge gaps across the sector.

When we launched the R2HC programme in 2013, it represented a concerted effort to fund research in humanitarian contexts. Since then we’ve gone on to fund over 60 research studies through our annual and rapid responsive calls for proposals.

We commissioned this study to identify, document and analyse evidence related to the rigorous conduct of public health research in humanitarian crises. By examining research methodologies used in our funded studies between 2014 – 2018, with a specific focus on the utilisation of adaptive or innovative approaches, we sought to identify key information related to methodological challenges and solutions in conducting research. This was supplemented by a literature review and interviews with a selected number of experts.

***The report was commissioned by Elrha’s R2HC programme and conducted by James Smith and Karl Blanchet.***

## KEY FINDINGS FROM THE REPORT

Analysis of the review findings, resulted in the identification of a number of overarching themes: ***challenging research, or challenging contexts?***; ***humanitarian response and research need to be aligned***; ***humanitarian research must be dynamic and responsive***; ***core elements need to be in place to ensure rigorous research***; ***frequently encountered methodological******issues***; and concludes with the question ‘**How innovative is humanitarian research?**’

## **Key findings include the following:**

* Adaptation of methodology is commonplace and ensures research can be implemented despite contextual constraints.
* While adaptation is frequently described in the literature and by sectoral experts, new and innovative methodologies are rarely being applied in studies funded through the R2HC; instead, researchers continue to implement tried and tested methodological approaches, with adaptation to sampling, randomisation, follow-up, and other core processes in pursuit of ethical good practice, and rigorous and reliable research outputs.
* A greater focus on the adapted application of established methods, and thus an elevation of the value of implementation research, holds promise, as does the application of mixed methods.
* To better understand and facilitate adaptation and the potential for innovation, opportunities must be created to document and discuss operational challenges and changes made during the research lifecycle. This will provide learning for others.
* Research groups should systematically include justification for study methodology and document adaptive practices through reporting mechanisms.
* Building a trusting relationship with local researchers is essential to enhance research quality. Capacity strengthening and regular and transparent communication between all parties, are key factors that contribute to this, enabling research teams to have all the necessary information available to make appropriate and timely decisions.
* Donors should consider the inclusion of core elements of the research process – including broader research capacity strengthening activities – within funding streams.
1. **Dijkzeul** D., Hilhorst D., Walker P. (2013), Introduction: evidence-based action in humanitarian crises. *Disasters*. Vol. 37 (S1): S1-19 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)