

# Prioritization of Humanitarian Research and Innovation in West Asia and North Africa

Policy Brief

January 10, 2024

## Introduction

Stemming from EMPHNET’s 36th Webinar on the “Global Prioritization Exercise (GPE): Humanitarian Research and Innovation in the WANA Region,” this policy brief addresses the critical role of Humanitarian Research and Innovation (R&I) in the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region. The region, facing complex humanitarian crises against broader developmental challenges, requires contextually appropriate responses, an aspect that the GPE initiative emphasizes.

It highlights the complex humanitarian landscape of the WANA region, as it is overwhelmed with humanitarian needs, with over 40 million migrants and forcibly displaced individuals, and around 70 million people, including 27 million children, requiring assistance. Challenges include conflicts, natural disasters, sociopolitical unrest, and COVID-19 impacts, compounded by climate change effects such as desertification and water scarcity.

The brief identifies barriers to effective R&I, including limited research capacity, inadequate funding, challenges in crisis settings, and political influences affecting R&I uptake and utilization.



## Highlights

Held on November 28, EMPHNET’s 36th Webinar saw distinguished experts, including Prof. Shahram Akbarzadeh from Deakin University, Prof. Abla Mohio from AUB, Dr. Yousef Khader from EMPHNET, Prof. Habiba Ben Romdhane from the University of Tunis El Manar, and Ms. Muna Abbas from the Asfari Foundation, present the outcomes of the GPE consultations for the WANA region. The recommendations were:

**National Level:** Establishing National Central Coordinating Bodies for R&I, formulating National Humanitarian R&I Strategies, and setting up R&I Units in key government departments.

**Regional Level:** Creating a Regional Humanitarian R&I Platform for collaboration and knowledge exchange, implementing a rotational secretariat for coordination, and establishing National and Regional Humanitarian R&I Teams.

**Global Level:** Developing a Global Ethical Framework for humanitarian research, addressing various ethical considerations and ensuring meaningful impact and effective implementation of findings.

**Donor Level:** Increasing funding and flexibility, ensuring needs-based funding, and enhancing donor communication and collaboration.

## The Synopsis

The role of Humanitarian Research and Innovation (R&I) is crucial for developing culturally and contextually appropriate responses to humanitarian crises. This is especially true in regions such as the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region which is grappling with some of the most complex humanitarian crises in the world against a backdrop of broader longstanding developmental challenges.

This policy brief stems from the outcome of EMPHNET's 36th Webinar titled "Global Prioritization Exercise (GPE): Humanitarian research and innovation in the WANA region". This webinar aimed to highlight the current state of humanitarian R&I and explore strategic directions for its enhancement in WANA.

Elrha's GPE was initiated in response to the growing scale of humanitarian crises, with 2022 witnessing an estimated 406.6 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. It studies the role of innovation in addressing the complex problems of humanitarian emergencies and the importance of equitable resource allocation and focus in humanitarian R&I. The exercise comprises global mapping of humanitarian R&I actors, investments, and thematic focus areas, as well as stakeholder consultations at various levels, aiming to understand the functioning of the humanitarian R&I ecosystem, decision-making processes, and regional R&I needs. This approach is crucial in addressing the disparities in attention and resource allocation within R&I, ensuring a more balanced and effective humanitarian response.

The WANA GPE study involved 21 stakeholders from diverse sectors within the humanitarian field, including academic institutions, non-governmental organizations, United Nations agencies, government bodies, R&I donors, and the private sector. Their wide-ranging perspectives enrich the overall understanding of humanitarian R&I in the WANA region.

## Core Insights

The region, encompassing 19 countries in West Asia and seven in North Africa, along with Iran, presents a complex humanitarian landscape characterized by large-scale emergencies and protracted crises. This section of the policy brief focuses on key challenges faced by the region and the dynamics of prioritizing humanitarian needs.

The region is also grappling with an overwhelming number of people in need of humanitarian aid. More than 40 million migrants and 16 million forcibly displaced individuals reside here, and approximately 70 million people, including a staggering 27 million children, require humanitarian assistance. These needs span various domains, including health and nutrition, protection services, education, and access to clean water.

Crises in the WANA region are multifaceted, encompassing conflicts, natural disasters, socioeconomic collapse, and the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. This complexity is further compounded by wars, armed conflicts, and political instability that have plagued the region since the Arab Spring in 2011. Moreover, each country within the region faces its unique set of humanitarian crises.

Gaza is currently enduring a humanitarian catastrophe marked by civilian casualties, widespread destruction, and critical shortages, further escalating the region's challenges. This has led to apocalyptic conditions. The health system is critically damaged, with a significant number of healthcare facilities and ambulances attacked or incapacitated. The humanitarian response is severely hampered, with essentials like food, water, and medical aid in short

## Core Insights

supply. The intense attacks have driven tens of thousands of Palestinians to flee, causing overcrowded shelters and leaving many displaced individuals in distress. This has precipitated a catastrophic hunger crisis across Gaza, highlighting the urgent need for a comprehensive and effective international response to alleviate the suffering.

Simultaneously, In Sudan, the conflict escalated in April 2023 and has precipitated a humanitarian crisis, marked by extensive displacement and casualties. Recent clashes have led to the displacement of up to 300,000 people. Since the onset of the conflict, over 6.7 million individuals have been displaced, both within and beyond Sudan's borders. This staggering number includes a majority who remain internally displaced, with current estimates indicating that more than 7 million people are displaced within Sudan, representing the largest internal displacement crisis globally.

Adding to these challenges is the climate crisis. The region, already burdened with harsh climatic conditions, faces the increasing threats of desertification, droughts, floods, and water scarcity, exacerbating the humanitarian situation. Natural disasters have become more frequent, intensifying the region's vulnerability and compounding the humanitarian needs.

Amidst these extensive challenges, the dynamics of prioritizing humanitarian needs in the WANA region are complex. The allocation of humanitarian resources and attention is often influenced by the scale and complexity of each crisis. This prioritization is further shaped by the international and regional geopolitical context, which can significantly shift focus and resources.

Simultaneously, the participants in the WANA GPE study identified key barriers to the production, uptake, and utilization of R&I. A critical issue is the limited research and innovation capacity due to a shortage of human resources and organizational capacity. This often leads to an overreliance on specific research designs and a lack of comprehensive analysis methods.

R&I is frequently not prioritized by governments, institutions, and communities, resulting in inadequate funding and support. Challenges in conducting research in crisis-affected settings, such as armed conflicts and pandemics, further complicate data collection and aligning research timelines with immediate evidence needs.

Furthermore, barriers to R&I uptake include issues like the commercialization of patents and limited dissemination of results, hindering widespread adoption. Political influences also play a role, with decisions and actions sometimes guided by politicians' agendas rather than the intrinsic value of R&I findings. These factors collectively impede the effective production and utilization of research and innovation in humanitarian contexts.



West Asia and  
North Africa

## Directions

The webinar's recommendations for enhancing **Humanitarian R&I** in the WANA region are as follows:

### At the National Level

- **Establish National Central Coordinating Bodies:** Create central R&I bodies within each country to regulate, prioritize, manage, and coordinate all R&I activities in humanitarian settings. These bodies, adaptable to the national context, could be housed within academic institutions, government agencies, or NGOs and should represent a broad range of stakeholders, including affected populations.
- **Develop National Humanitarian R&I Strategies:** Formulate strategies to address priority R&I topics, identified through a transparent and inclusive process. These strategies should comply with national regulatory frameworks and include dedicated financing plans.
- **Establish R&I Units in Key Government Departments:** Particularly in refugee-hosting countries, these units would build the importance of R&I among policymakers and decision-makers, with a focus on earmarking funding for Humanitarian R&I and streamlining bureaucratic processes.

### At the Regional Level

- **Establish a Regional Humanitarian R&I Platform:** This platform would support collaboration, engagement, information dissemination, and help break down silos between research and operational actors. It would also facilitate knowledge exchange, technical support for R&I activities, and sharing of humanitarian data, study protocols, and ethics guidelines.
- **Secretariat for the Regional Humanitarian R&I Platform:** Implement a rotational secretariat among the national coordinating bodies to enhance regional coordination.
- **Establish National and Regional Humanitarian R&I Teams:** These teams would be responsible for planning, conducting, and reporting Humanitarian R&I activities. Appropriate training programs, similar to Field Epidemiology Training Programs (FETPs), should be established, along with a roster of surge support from existing Rapid Response Teams (RRTs).
- **Conduct Additional Research:** Engage a broader range of participants to identify key humanitarian topics and priority issues requiring R&I attention. This should include a formal R&I priority-setting exercise, ensuring research and innovation efforts address the most pressing regional needs.
- **Improve Priority-Setting Processes:** Utilize structured and participatory processes for priority setting and decision-making in Humanitarian R&I. Ensure equity in priority setting, taking into account perspectives of marginalized communities and ethical considerations.

## At the Global Level

- **Development of a Global Ethical Framework:** Focus on creating a comprehensive framework for ethical funding and the conduct of humanitarian research in crisis contexts. This framework should address various ethical considerations, including corruption, vested interests, lack of financial accountability, transparency, and the ethical conduct of research. It should ensure that research undertaken has meaningful impact and that findings are implemented effectively, translating into practical action. The development process should involve a transparent global dialogue, incorporating insights from existing literature on humanitarian research methodologies and ethical challenges. The goal is to establish a framework that not only covers ethical issues in conducting research but also the broader ethical implications inherent in crisis contexts. This comprehensive approach is intended to elevate the ethical standards in humanitarian research, ensuring responsible and impactful practices globally.

## At the Donor Level

- **Increase Funding and Flexibility:** Invest in sustainable infrastructures and capacity-building initiatives, considering regional geopolitical challenges and local contexts. Encourage engagement with local researchers and affected populations in R&I agendas.
- **Ensure Needs-Based Funding:** Align funding with regional needs and long-term goals, avoiding donor-driven priorities. Enhance communication and collaboration among donors for better coordination.
- **Enhance Donor Communication and Collaboration:** Key aspects include aligning funding with regional needs, mandatory engagement with local researchers, and addressing ethical and methodological challenges. This approach aims to improve the effectiveness and relevance of humanitarian research in WANA.

These recommendations offer a roadmap for change, emphasizing the establishment of national and regional Humanitarian R&I coordinating bodies, the development of comprehensive national strategies, and the enhancement of research and innovation capabilities. Prioritizing these actions will pave the way for a more resilient, effective, and equitable humanitarian response system in WANA, addressing the needs of its diverse and vulnerable populations.

Ultimately, the successful implementation of these recommendations hinges on collaborative efforts, strategic resource allocation, and an inclusive approach, ensuring that no community is left behind in the face of escalating humanitarian challenges.

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### GHD|EMPHNET: Working Together for Better Health

The Eastern Mediterranean Public Health Network (EMPHNET) is a regional network that focuses on strengthening public health systems in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) and beyond. EMPHNET works in partnership with ministries of health, non-government organizations, international agencies, private sector, and relevant institutions from the region and the globe to promote public health and applied epidemiology. To advance the work of EMPHNET, Global Health Development (GHD) was initiated to build coordination mechanisms with partners and collaborators. Together, GHD|EMPHNET is dedicated to serving the region by supporting efforts to promote public health policies, strategic planning, sustainable financing, resource mobilization, public health programs, and other related areas.