

EXPLANATION OF DEFINITION, AND HOW TO USE THIS CRITERION

EXPLANATION OF DEFINITION

The coherence criterion encourages a systemic approach to evaluation, rather than a limited programmatic or institution-centric perspective.²⁹ This means understanding how humanitarian action by one actor relates to the wider system – sectorally, by country and globally.

Evaluate complementarity (see [Box 4](#)) at the operational or programmatic level between humanitarian action *by different actors and for different groups* affected by crisis. Have different actors added value and avoided duplication? This may include humanitarian advocacy. Coordination is key to achieving this (see [Box 5](#)). Explore how internationally led and nationally or locally led humanitarian action complement each other (see [Chapter 11](#)).

BOX 4: COMPLEMENTARITY

Complementarity, usually between international and national or local humanitarian actors, means understanding and leveraging the different strengths and capabilities of each to create a more effective humanitarian response overall.

For example, in advocacy for protection, national actors usually have better access to national interlocutors, and a deeper understanding of the context and dynamics. They will remain after international actors have withdrawn. International actors may have better access to regional and international platforms and interlocutors, and greater access to funding. It is important that international protection advocacy efforts neither overlook nor undermine national and local advocacy efforts (Davies and Spencer, 2022).

BOX 5: COORDINATION

Coordination is sometimes promoted as a criterion in its own right (ALNAP, 2016), or it is evaluated under effectiveness (ALNAP, 2006). However, we include it here, because evaluating coordination is critical to understanding coherence with a systemic lens.

Evaluate coordination to understand if humanitarian action implemented by different actors promotes synergy, and avoids gaps and duplication (ALNAP, 2016).

²⁹ This is also reflected in the OECD definition of coherence.

Also evaluate coordination of humanitarian advocacy. Coordination may be evaluated at different levels – sectorally, inter-sectorally, within a particular group of actors (e.g. UN agencies or a confederation of NGOs), or across an entire humanitarian response. Coordination is a key issue in inter-agency evaluations.

You can also evaluate coherence at a policy level. How do organisations (individually or collectively) align their humanitarian action with their own policies and standards, or with those of the humanitarian system? Look at consistency between policies and standards and explore synergies or tensions between policy areas. For example, an international humanitarian actor may commit to humanitarian principles, and also have a policy on working across and linking its humanitarian, development and peacebuilding pillars. In some contexts, however, following the principle of neutrality requires maintaining distance from peacebuilding actors and from actors who are party to the conflict. Evaluate how the respective humanitarian actor(s) recognises and manages this tension. Your findings could inform and influence policy revision.

Evaluate how humanitarian actors engage with relevant policies of the government of the country affected by the crisis. Your line of enquiry may vary from one context to another. For example, where the crisis is triggered by a natural hazard such as flooding or drought, or where a government's refugee policy follows the International Refugee Convention, evaluate the extent to which the humanitarian actor aligns with government policy. In other contexts, where a government is party to the conflict and/or obstructing operational access by humanitarian actors to those affected by the crisis, an appropriate line of enquiry might relate to advocacy with government about its obligations under International Humanitarian Law.

WHEN TO SELECT COHERENCE

Coherence is particularly relevant for multi-agency/inter-agency evaluations. Here, explore the extent to which different actors coordinate and complement one another's work rather than duplicate and/or compete.

Coherence is also important when evaluating international support to locally led humanitarian action. Explore if and how humanitarian action by these different actors is complementary, and how the respective comparative advantage of each is taken into account, including knowledge and capacity (see [section 11.2 Locally led humanitarian action](#)).

You can also use the coherence criterion for a single-agency evaluation. If that organisation has multiple mandates, evaluate coherence between its internal policies and system-wide standards. Also analyse if the organisation coordinates with other agencies to add value and avoid duplication.

HOW COHERENCE RELATES TO OTHER CRITERIA

Coherence relates most closely to inter-connection. Note, the two criteria can be confused, especially if these concepts do not translate easily into different languages. The key distinction is that inter-connection evaluates the nature of the relationship *between different types of actors* (humanitarian, human rights, development, peacebuilding etc), and coherence focuses on coordination *between humanitarian actors*. Coherence also evaluates consistency and how tensions are managed at policy level.

Coherence relates to effectiveness and impact too. If an overall humanitarian response is coordinated well within a functioning system, an individual humanitarian actor can take more effective humanitarian action, with the prospect for greater positive impact. To evaluate transformational change, take a systemic approach focusing on relationships and interactions within a system rather than individual components. This is also important for evaluating environmental issues – for example, has the design and coordination of an entire humanitarian response minimised or avoided potential negative environmental effects and promoted resilience? Evaluate the contribution of individual humanitarian actors within that overall analysis.

SHIFTING THE LENS: POWER AND POSITIONALITY

In evaluating coherence, assess not just alignment with international frameworks, but also how well humanitarian action respects and reinforces local capacities and knowledge. Do the policies that humanitarian actors align with make sense to partners and communities affected by crisis?

Reflect on how your positionality might reinforce dominant narratives or overlook local knowledge. Bias towards formal institutions, for example, can marginalise informal, community-led efforts that are coherent within their context.

Question assumptions that international actors naturally take the lead, especially when their policies override national ones. In some crises, international agencies establish parallel coordination systems, sidelining local authorities and weakening long-term capacity. Or they may influence national systems – such as advocating for the integration of humanitarian cash transfers into social protection frameworks.

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Key consideration A

Coherence is a complex concept that may not translate easily across languages and cultures.

Methodological implications for commissioners

Identify which of the two dimensions of coherence are key to the evaluation. If evaluating operational coherence, clarify at which level (sectorally, inter-sectorally,

across organisations) and if this includes coherence of advocacy too. For policy coherence, identify the policies and standards against which humanitarian action will be evaluated. To what extent, and how, should the evaluation focus on engagement with government policy, and at what level – national or local?

Explore how best to translate 'coherence' into other languages, using different terminology if necessary.

Methodological implications for evaluators

Unpack coherence during the inception phase. For example, for policy coherence, identify potential contradictions and tensions between policies and standards. Assess if it is possible in a time-limited evaluation to analyse how tensions have been managed in practice and the consequences. If evaluating engagement with government policy, clarify the appropriate line of enquiry, e.g. alignment with government policy and/or advocacy on government policy.

Key consideration B

There are many different perspectives on what constitutes complementarity between international and locally led humanitarian action. This can make it difficult to reach an evaluative judgement.

Methodological implications for commissioners

Identify policies and standards on supporting locally led humanitarian action that provide a reference point. Such frameworks may help the evaluation team conduct its analysis and reach an evaluative judgement.

Methodological implications for evaluators

Recognise the power dynamics within the humanitarian system when evaluating complementarity. For example, if international actors have greater access to financial resources, they are likely to set the relationship between international and locally led humanitarian action. How do local actors experience this? Ensure their perspectives are heard and considered in reaching an evaluative judgement.

Key consideration C

Evaluating the nature and quality of coordination is about outcome as well as process.

Methodological implications for commissioners

Formulate questions that address both process (how effectively coordination mechanisms have worked) and outcome (how coordination has contributed to collaboration and avoided duplication).

Methodological implications for evaluators

Talk to humanitarian actors and ensure meaningful consultation with different groups amongst the population affected by crisis. This will provide key perspectives on whether humanitarian action by different actors has been harmonised, and the consequences.

EVALUATION EXAMPLE

Review of regional coordination mechanisms in response to mixed movements in the LAC region (July 2024)

Background

This inter-agency study applies OECD criteria to examine interagency coordination mechanisms used to respond to mixed movements in the Latin American and Caribbean region, and how coordination can be improved.

How the study addresses coordination

The study maps and analyses regional inter-institutional coordination mechanisms against a number of criteria (e.g. mandate, target population, leadership etc), using a consultative and participatory approach. It analyses strategic planning, advocacy, fundraising strategies, information management, and response monitoring and outcomes across the coordination mechanisms, and it explores awareness of the different coordination mechanisms.

- The study examines complementarity between regional and national coordination mechanisms.
- It also analyses how coordination mechanisms have taken into account the inclusivity of different actors, highlighting good practice and neglected groups. It explores the participation of local actors, including their adoption of coordination mechanisms.
- While the TOR does not mention governance specifically, the study finds that the governance of different coordination mechanisms affects complementarity between mechanisms and inclusivity.

Source: IECAH (2024).

EVALUATION EXAMPLE

Evaluation of UNHCR's engagement in situations of internal displacement (2019 to 2023) (February 2024)

Background

This global thematic evaluation addresses relevance, effectiveness, connectedness, coherence and strategic positioning to inform UNHCR's policies and operational approach to internal displacement. Primarily a formative evaluation, it has elements of a summative evaluation and normative enquiry.

How the study addresses policy coherence

The evaluation asks: *To what extent is UNHCR working in line with its 2019 UNHCR IDP policy?* It draws on four in-depth country case studies and five light-touch country reviews.

- The evaluation assesses the role of policies and guidance in clarifying UNHCR's responsibilities and commitments on internal displacement.
- It identifies inconsistencies in the application of the 2019 IDP policy and the reasons behind this, including resource constraints and context.
- It highlights that policy provisions require clearer guidance for effective implementation, and efforts are needed to strengthen staff support (e.g. training) and to enhance senior management accountability – such as through performance appraisals.

Source: UNHCR (2024).

HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES AND COHERENCE

The coherence criterion fits well with humanitarian principles. The policy dimension provides a space to explore consistency and/or trade-offs between policies, including in how humanitarian principles have been applied.

A strong understanding of context is key, particularly the political economy of the humanitarian crisis and response, to appreciate challenges to principled humanitarian action and different trade-offs required.

WFP's evaluation of its Level 3 response in north-east Nigeria demonstrates this well (WFP, 2019).

Example overarching evaluation question (drawing on WFP, 2019):

How were the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence applied in the response?

Sub-questions:

To what extent were humanitarian principles applied in all phases of the programme cycle?

How were trade-offs between humanitarian principles managed?



CHAPTER 10

IMPACT

DEFINITION

What are the higher-level and transformative effects of humanitarian action?

Impact examines the effects of humanitarian action from individual and household levels, through to macro and systemic changes to societies. Beyond immediate effects, impact captures the unintended, varied and collective effects of humanitarian action – positive or negative, in the short, medium or long term.

KEY MESSAGES

- Impact means different things to different people. Consider the diverse perspectives of people affected by crisis and the goals of humanitarian actors, ensuring impact captures what truly matters to those affected most by crises.
- Effectiveness evaluates the achievement of the immediate results of humanitarian action; impact evaluates what these achievements (or non-achievements) mean over time at individual, household, community and societal levels.

EXPLANATION OF DEFINITION, AND HOW TO USE THIS CRITERION

EXPLANATION OF CRITERION

Impact examines the high-level and transformative effects of humanitarian action. This includes social, economic and environmental consequences that unfold over time and

that affect individuals, communities and institutions differently. This aligns with the OECD definition of impact as the 'transformative effect of an intervention' or the extent to which it brings 'holistic and enduring changes' (OECD, 2019: 64).

In essence, the immediate objectives of humanitarian action are to save lives, alleviate suffering and protect people's dignity. Use the impact criterion to explore the extent to which humanitarian actors' efforts reduce the needs, risks and vulnerabilities of people affected by crisis, or the reverse. For example, in humanitarian response to severe flooding, cash assistance or psychosocial support can lower stress, improve food security, reduce negative coping strategies and, potentially, enhance household resilience to withstand future disasters. These are measurable and important outcomes that could lead to sustainable change – impact.

First consider the context, informed by analysis of the needs and priorities of affected people. Second, consider the overall objectives of humanitarian action. What constitutes impact can emerge from discussions with people affected by crisis and other stakeholders, and/or your review of context. Impacts can be:

- **unintended:** Pay close attention to unintended impacts, both positive and negative. Focus especially on negative impacts that could be significant. This includes, but is not limited to, environmental impacts (see [section 11.3 Environment and climate crisis](#)) and unintended effects on vulnerable or marginalised groups. Assess any potential to fuel grievances or tensions between groups and other behavioural effects of humanitarian assistance.
- **varied:** Consider the extent to which outcomes and impacts have varied between different people, groups and communities. Prioritise the voices of communities affected by crisis in your evaluation (see [section 11.1 Putting people affected by crisis at the centre](#)).
- **collective:** Consider the collective (and sometimes cumulative) impact of multiple humanitarian actors within a context (see also [Chapter 8: Inter-connection](#)). It is very difficult to isolate the impact of one actor. For example, explore the synergy between different humanitarian programmes and policies, and whether they contribute to overarching goals to improve the well-being of people affected by crisis or strengthen local institutions (see [section 11.2 Locally led humanitarian action](#)).

Note, however, that indirect, varied and collective impacts such as changes in socioeconomic and political processes may take many months or even years to become apparent. Other impacts can be detected and measured in a shorter timeframe at the individual, household and even community level. Determine the timeframe to be evaluated.

WHEN TO SELECT IMPACT

Impact is key to understanding if humanitarian action is truly making a meaningful difference, especially from the perspective of those affected by crisis. Use it to uncover

indirect positive or negative transformative effects, especially on vulnerable and marginalised people, groups and communities, or on the environment. Evaluate impact to ensure that humanitarian actors adhere to the principle to 'Do No Harm' by identifying and mitigating potential harm or the exacerbation of existing vulnerabilities.

BOX 6: IMPACT EVALUATION

Impact provides a conceptual lens to evaluate high-level and transformative effects of humanitarian action. Impact evaluation attributes observed changes (usually at the individual or community level) to specific humanitarian programmes or projects, using a counterfactual. Thus, it establishes that humanitarian action has directly caused these outcomes.

Impact evaluation and the impact criterion can serve complementary purposes – it is the level of analysis and methods that usually differ. Manage expectations among all stakeholders of what is technically feasible for the depth of outcome and impact analysis. This guides your evaluation approach and cost implications.

HOW IMPACT RELATES TO OTHER CRITERIA

Use the effectiveness criterion to evaluate what immediate effects have been achieved and for whom. Use the impact criterion to explore the consequences of those achievements – or the lack thereof. In other words, effectiveness tells us what has been accomplished; impact asks so what?

For example, in a cash assistance programme, use effectiveness to assess how populations affected by crisis have used the money – e.g. if families have been able to afford nutritious meals. Use impact to examine if this has led to broader changes – improved nutrition among the targeted population, enhanced well-being or stronger local economies.

Importantly, examining impact also opens up questions about the sustainability of humanitarian outcomes (see [Box 3](#)). It prompts us to consider if positive changes – improved well-being or local economic recovery – have been short-lived or have contributed to longer-term benefits for populations affected by crisis. Understanding these dynamics can help identify the types of support that are more likely to lead to lasting change, even beyond the immediate crisis response.

SHIFTING THE LENS: POWER AND POSITIONALITY

Reflect on how your own identities, assumptions and institutional mandates shape what you consider to be 'impactful'. Is the presentation of impact primarily shaped by a desire to demonstrate organisational success – potentially at the expense of acknowledging complex or uncomfortable outcomes? This ties to the bias of adopting deficit-based

framings when reporting broader or transformative effects. Be alert to when you unintentionally reinforce stereotypes, such as portraying communities affected by crisis primarily as vulnerable, passive or dependent.

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Key consideration A

Consider the inherent limitations of assessing attribution or even contribution, given the chaotic, complex and interconnected nature of humanitarian action. Multiple actors and external factors influence impact.

Methodological implications for commissioners

Consider commissioning a multi-agency evaluation to look at outcomes and impact.

Methodological implications for evaluators

Explore how you can map pathways of contribution or attribution. Be transparent around methodological limitations.

Assess stakeholder perspectives on the primary objectives of the action and higher-level impacts. Are these reflected in the theory of change/programme model? This will become a roadmap to examine either programme contribution or attribution to results from a short-, medium- or long-term perspective.

Key consideration B

Scarce data (e.g. lack of baseline data or high-quality monitoring data) often limits assessments of the impact of humanitarian action.

Methodological implications for commissioners

Specify data requirements for evaluations in the inception phase, ensuring necessary data is collected and available. Consider alternative sources of data (e.g. administrative data, geospatial data, household surveys with GIS referencing).

Methodological implications for evaluators

Complement secondary data analysis with context-sensitive and trauma-informed methods (e.g. life histories, life journals) where people affected by crisis can recall their previous situation and how it has changed. This is important in all evaluation methods, and particularly when discussing impact. People may need to reflect on difficult past events to illustrate change.

Triangulate data with other sources for a comprehensive picture and address potential biases (e.g. memory distortions).

Unintended impacts on an affected population may not be obvious to an external evaluator, hence engage with local people, including those from affected populations, to identify and understand such impacts.

EVALUATION EXAMPLE

Final evaluation of emergency health care services provision for Syrian refugees in Jordan (2021)

Background

Islamic Relief Worldwide commissioned an evaluation of its Healthcare Aid for Syrian Refugees in Jordan project. This provided Syrian refugees and vulnerable Jordanians with access to primary, secondary and tertiary healthcare, including haemodialysis services for end-stage renal disease patients. The project also sought to raise health awareness in the community to reduce mortality and improve overall health outcomes.

How the evaluation addresses varied and unintended impacts

The evaluation analyses multiple dimensions of impact: long-term impacts, impacts across sub-groups (varied) and unintended impacts.

- Using data from surveys and focus group discussions, it assesses if the project created long-lasting and transformational effects for participants. Many patients experienced notable improvements in health following surgical support.
- Statistical significance tests at the 90% confidence level identify differences in outcomes across sub-groups (e.g. nationality, age, gender).
- The evaluation shows unintended impacts, particularly increased awareness about COVID-19. Participants were initially hesitant about vaccines or sceptical of the virus, but many felt reassured and more informed having attended healthcare and awareness sessions. Trust in medical staff shifted perceptions and increased vaccine uptake during the pandemic.

Source: *Phoenix Center for Economics and Informatics Studies (2022)*.

HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES AND IMPACT

This criterion provides an opportunity to evaluate the wider impact of humanitarian actors adopting (or failing to adopt) a principled approach. Just as it is easier to evaluate the collective impact of multiple humanitarian actors versus single actors, so it is easier to evaluate the impact of principled humanitarian action across the whole response, for example in an inter-agency humanitarian evaluation. However, it is difficult to build sufficient evidence to identify conclusively the wider impact of principled humanitarian action, or of trade-offs made. In-depth research may be more appropriate in some contexts.

At a minimum, explore if and how humanitarian principles have been built into the theory of change. How was principled humanitarian action expected to have an impact? Or has this been overlooked?

Example evaluation question for a joint inter-agency humanitarian evaluation:

To what extent has there been collective effort to follow humanitarian principles, and what has been the overall impact?