CHAPTER 11
PRIORITY THEMES

This chapter presents three priority themes and how to intentionally include them in evaluation of humanitarian action. The priority themes provide additional lenses through which to evaluate humanitarian action, and they complement the criteria (see **Chapters 1** and **2** for the rationale and definition of priority themes).

11.1 PUTTING PEOPLE AFFECTED BY CRISIS AT THE CENTRE

KEY MESSAGES

- Humanitarian actors have committed to put people affected by crisis at the centre of humanitarian action, but deep-rooted power imbalances hinder how actors apply this in practice. Consequently, humanitarian action often fails to align with the needs and priorities of those who actors seek to assist.

- Pay particular attention to the quality of engagement, including cultural sensitivity and dynamics of power and trust between humanitarian actors and communities. Explore whether the perspectives of people affected by crisis have been listened to and acted upon.

- Put affected people at the centre in evaluation. Consider carefully who should be involved and for what purpose, how they will participate at each step of the evaluation process, and what benefits they reap.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Humanitarian actors have long committed to put people affected by crisis at the centre, as emphasised in different standards and frameworks. Humanitarian actors should seek out and value the diverse knowledge and experiences of people affected by crisis. They

should actively listen to understand what matters most to affected people and ensure that decisions are based on their needs and perspectives. It is especially important that humanitarian action recognises the inherent agency of affected people and that humanitarian actors understand, respect and build upon what people are already doing positively for themselves in a crisis context.

Many humanitarian organisations and evaluators continue to face challenges in ensuring they are led by the priorities of people affected by crisis. And this reflects fundamental and deep-rooted power imbalances within the humanitarian system (ALNAP, 2022; Doherty, 2023). Opportunities are missed for genuine community engagement; there is a lack of accountability to affected people; and humanitarian programmes, policies and measures of success do not fully align with the needs and priorities of those they aim to assist.

INTENTIONAL USE OF THE PRIORITY THEME IN EVALUATION

KEY AREAS OF ENQUIRY

Follow key areas of enquiry to evaluate the extent to which humanitarian action is driven by the priorities of people affected by crisis.

- **Agency and decision-making:** Evaluate the extent to which people affected by crisis have been able to influence decisions made by humanitarian actors throughout the response. Look for concrete ways that humanitarian actors have been led by or have responded to affected peoples' preferences and priorities in a timely manner.

- **Quality engagement and communication:** Evaluate the nature of the relationship between humanitarian actors and affected people, and especially the different ways humanitarian actors have sought to listen to, and address, their concerns. This includes efforts to engage with diverse groups, such as youth, older people, women, children, persons living with disability and ethnic groups. Assess cultural sensitivity and dynamics of power and trust between humanitarian actors and communities, and the ways humanitarian actors have observed the principle to 'Do No Harm'.

- **Results and resources:** Evaluate the extent to which the success of humanitarian action is judged by its effectiveness in involving affected people in decision-making and in responding to their concerns and feedback. Look for evidence that indicators of effectiveness have been identified by affected people as well as by humanitarian actors. Has community engagement been included as a specific outcome indicator, or prioritised by leadership? Have sufficient resources — funding, personnel and time — been allocated to facilitate meaningful participation of affected populations in decision-making processes?

- **Coordination and collaboration:** Review systems and partnerships between humanitarian actors put in place to better meet the needs of affected people and reduce the burden of data collection. Assess the extent to which humanitarian actors have shared data, coordinated communication efforts and engaged with communities.

Have assessments been harmonised to minimise disruption and provide more coherent and accessible support to affected populations?

*Source: This draws on several frameworks and guidelines, such as the CHS (2024). See also **Annex 3**.*

BOX 7: PUTTING PEOPLE AFFECTED BY CRISIS AT THE CENTRE OF THE EHA PROCESS

It is a well-established principle and standard of practice to engage affected people as integral partners in the EHA process. Many resources, including evaluation standards and guidelines, emphasise the ethical and practical imperative of engaging with communities in a meaningful way (see ALNAP, 2016; UNEG, 2016b; De Mel et al, 2023). Such engagement can span from co-design through to analysis and ensuring that affected communities benefit from the evaluation outcomes.

Central to this approach is the careful consideration of who should be involved, for what purpose, how they will participate at each stage, and the benefits they will reap. Yet achieving this in practice — especially when resources are constrained — remains a challenge. See **Further reading** for additional resources on this theme.

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Key consideration A

Logistical and sociocultural barriers in humanitarian contexts can make it difficult to ensure that evaluations include voices from all segments of the population affected by crisis, including marginalised and vulnerable people, groups or communities.

Methodological implications for commissioners

Set clear expectations in the TOR for inclusive engagement and allocate sufficient time and resources in the evaluation plan to reach diverse groups.

Support evaluators to navigate sociocultural barriers and provide flexibility for adaptive methods.

Methodological implications for evaluators

Identify and implement inclusive data collection methods tailored to different groups. Consider power dynamics among community members (i.e. only the most powerful voices may be heard in group meetings; one-to-one interviews with a carefully chosen interviewer in a private setting may enable openness and honesty).

To facilitate participation, collaborate with local actors from diverse segments of the affected population who have established trust within the community. Define the criteria and process for selecting these local representatives, to ensure transparency and inclusivity. Report on barriers encountered and how they have been addressed.

Key consideration B

Power dynamics between evaluators, humanitarian agencies and people affected by crisis can influence openness and honesty of feedback provided.

Methodological implications for commissioners

Ensure that the TOR emphasises ethical considerations and includes protocols to protect the rights and dignity of participants.

Methodological implications for evaluators

Create a safe environment for people affected by crisis to share openly. Be explicit about who has access to the data, how results and/or recommendations will be validated or shared with affected people (if feasible), and how sensitive information will be protected.

Key consideration C

The dissemination of evaluation findings — and, ideally, management responses — to communities affected by crisis is a key component of accountability and feedback in EHA. This component needs to be covered in both the budget and the TOR.

Methodological implications for commissioners

Include dissemination of evaluation findings to affected communities as a mandatory requirement in the TOR and allocate a budget. Monitor and support the implementation of these activities to ensure affected communities receive and understand the evaluation outcomes.

Plan dissemination strategies at the inception phase and ensure that communities have a say on the best way to ensure the evaluation process and outcomes are accessible and culturally sensitive.

Develop tailored communication strategies to share findings, for example visual summaries, community meetings or local radio broadcasts.

Methodological implications for evaluators

Lobby the commissioner of the evaluation to include this component in the EHA process, discussing benefits and trade-offs if not done.

EVALUATION EXAMPLE

Evaluation of UNHCR's Mauritania country strategy 2020–2022 (October 2023)

Background

While national in scope, UNHCR's country strategy evaluation focuses on key intervention areas in Mauritania, including Nouakchott, Nouadhibou, and the Mbera camp and its surroundings in the Bassikounou municipality. The evaluation assesses strategic relevance, coherence and effectiveness, exploring how and for whom interventions have contributed to improved outcomes. It examines if UNHCR's structures and capacities are fit for purpose, with recommendations for improvements.

How the evaluation puts people affected by crisis at the centre

The evaluation pilots an adapted version of the International Association for Public Participation's 'spectrum of public participation' tool. This supports a shift away from traditional consultation methods towards more meaningful involvement and collaboration with affected populations — particularly refugees.

From the outset, the evaluation team mapped refugee-led organisations (RLOs) and camp governance structures in Mbera camp, and they included local evaluators in the team. In the inception phase, the refugee camp coordinator was interviewed to ensure early input into the evaluation design. In the data collection phase, RLOs and other refugee representatives were consulted directly. The analysis phase was particularly participatory — RLO representatives in Mbera camp co-validated the findings and co-created recommendations in a workshop. Refugees were also engaged in the reporting phase as co-recipients of final recommendations on camp governance, shelter and camp service provision. Young refugees contributed to a video summarising the evaluation's key messages.

Despite these gains, the evaluation process faced limitations. Urban refugees had less structured representation and were less involved, partly due to budget constraints. Similarly, host communities had limited engagement. Efforts to include a refugee representative in the formal Evaluation Reference Group faced barriers related to cultural expectations, power imbalances and resource constraints. Lack of participation in the post-report management response process highlights an ongoing challenge in closing the accountability loop to people affected by crisis.

- The evaluation uses a structured participation tool, enabling a more predictable, inclusive evaluation process. This enhanced the quality of engagement and accountability to affected populations.
- More participatory approaches require additional time and resources, but they help rebalance power dynamics. They position affected people not just as data sources but as partners in shaping humanitarian decision-making that affects their lives.

Source: UNHCR (2023c).

11.2 LOCALLY LED HUMANITARIAN ACTION

KEY MESSAGES

- Evaluation is important to explore local actors' leadership (or lack thereof) in humanitarian action. Analyse the structural and operational barriers that limit the influence of local actors and recommend how these can be overcome. Actively engage local actors in the EHA process to comprehensively understand humanitarian action.

- Local actors are not a homogeneous group; they operate with different priorities and relationships within their communities. Consider how these variations influence their ability to lead humanitarian efforts, how they relate to the population affected by crisis, and whether certain groups face barriers to participation or resources.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Locally led humanitarian action ensures that crisis response is shaped by those closest to the affected population and their needs, and that action leverages local capacities and leadership. It strengthens existing community structures rather than bypasses them. For both local and international actors, this means aligning efforts with, and reinforcing, local systems. This means working with community structures on protection issues, partnering with local health clinics for medical support, and supporting disability-led organisations to ensure inclusive and accessible livelihoods.

It is crucial to recognise the diverse roles of local actors. Many are deeply embedded in their communities and well-positioned to respond to local needs, but their approaches and priorities can vary. It is especially important in conflict-related crises to understand how their positionality can influence who receives humanitarian assistance — and who is excluded. In some cases, local actors may exclude certain groups based on factors like ethnicity and/or they may have motivations other than humanitarian ones. Understanding how affected people perceive different actors is also critical. Integrate these perspectives in your evaluation (see **Methodological implications**) to gain a more nuanced view of locally led humanitarian action and its impact on communities.

BOX 8: IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS IN DEFINING LOCAL ACTORS

The term 'local actor' often overlooks the diversity of organisations and individuals who originate from and actively contribute to humanitarian action and development within a given country (noting that many local actors do not differentiate between humanitarian and development in the way that international actors do).

In this guide, we use 'local actor' to mean institutions originating from, based and operating within the local context of reference, comprising citizens subject to local laws, and whose work centres on local communities. They include those working at national, regional and local levels, and they encompass government institutions, local authorities, the private sector, civil society organisations, and formal and informal community-led groups.

INTENTIONAL USE OF THE PRIORITY THEME IN EVALUATION

KEY AREAS OF ENQUIRY

Follow key areas of enquiry to evaluate locally led humanitarian action. Assess which areas of enquiry are most appropriate according to the nature of humanitarian action, key issues and challenges arising, and the scope and scale of your evaluation.

● **Ownership, leadership and influence:** Explore the extent to which humanitarian action is locally owned and influenced at all stages of the humanitarian response. If international support was available, examine if international humanitarian actors have supported local leadership. Consider variations in local actors' values, priorities and power dynamics, and how this shapes their leadership and relationships with affected communities (e.g. their role in the inclusion or exclusion of certain groups in receiving assistance).

● **Knowledge and capacity exchange:** Evaluate how all humanitarian actors promote knowledge and capacity exchange with each other, whether international or local. Assess whether knowledge-sharing is reciprocal or one-directional, the extent to which capacity support is demand-driven, and how well it aligns with local priorities.

● **Funding:** Investigate the quantity and quality of humanitarian funding directed towards local and national actors from different sources — international and national. Analyse the flexibility, adequacy and duration of funding, and whether it adequately supports overhead costs and risks faced by local actors.

- **Partnerships:** Evaluate the quality of partnerships between local actors (e.g. local organisations often forge partnerships with other local actors such as community-based organisations), and between international and local actors. Assess how these partnerships are formed, negotiated and maintained, and the extent to which they foster equitable collaboration, risk-sharing and mutual respect.

- **Visibility and recognition:** Examine how humanitarian action contributes to increasing the visibility and recognition of local actors' work in the response. Evaluate if local actors are acknowledged publicly in ways they deem appropriate and that do no harm, and how their role is represented in reports, media and policy discussions.

- **Coordination and complementarity:** Examine the extent to which humanitarian coordination mechanisms promote and reinforce local leadership, including organisations and groups representing the marginalised and vulnerable. Analyse whether humanitarian action builds on existing coordination mechanisms between local actors.

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Key consideration A

A clear definition of what constitutes 'local' ensures consistency among stakeholders. It also acknowledges the diversity of local actors, avoiding oversimplification.

Methodological implications for commissioners

Ensure that local actors are involved in defining locally led humanitarian action and how it can be evaluated.

Allocate sufficient financial and logistical resources for meaningful local actor participation at each stage of the evaluation, from design to interpretation of findings.

Methodological implications for evaluators

Work with commissioners and local stakeholders to refine the definition of 'local' in practice. Adapt the definition to different settings within a single evaluation to capture varied forms of local leadership.

Resist homogenising local actors and instead capture their diverse roles, capacities and relationships with national, regional and international actors.

Key consideration B

Assessing local leadership — whether local actors have accessed sufficient resources and if the partnership has allowed equitable collaboration — requires careful attention. Shifts in influence and power dynamics manifest subtly and may not be discussed openly.

Methodological implications for commissioners

Ensure the evaluation process is designed to create safe, confidential spaces for local actors to share their experiences and perspectives on leadership, collaboration and resource distribution, without fear of repercussion or judgement.

Methodological implications for evaluators

Look for implicit signs of power shifts — changes in who sets the agenda in meetings, who has access to critical information, shifts in decision-making authority or increased recognition of local actors' contributions in key processes, even when these shifts are not acknowledged formally or discussed openly.

EVALUATION EXAMPLE

Evaluation of Hunga Tonga — Hunga Ha'apai Disaster Response Programme (December 2023)

Background

The Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai Disaster Response Programme was implemented in partnership by CARE Australia, Mainstreaming of Rural Development Innovation Tonga Trust (MORDI TT) and Talitha Project in Tonga. This end-of-programme evaluation assesses effectiveness, the strengths of its partnership model, and key lessons to improve future humanitarian responses following the January 2022 volcano eruption and tsunami.

How the evaluation addresses locally led humanitarian action

The evaluation assesses the ways that local partners were involved throughout the project management cycle, demonstrating best practice to promote effective collaboration, contextual relevance and sustainable investments. The evaluation specifically assesses the partnership between CARE Australia, MORDI TT and Talitha Project, and how the partnership model supported locally led humanitarian action. It provides evidence and recommendations on how to strengthen features of the partnership model, and the use of resources — primarily flexible funding — to achieve quality and impactful programming.

The evaluation also grounds the approach in a key local Tongan framework (the *Kakala* research framework), plus other existing frameworks to assess local leadership. It uses multi-stakeholder interviews and document review to inform findings and recommendations. The interviews proved valuable for communities, allowing them space to reflect on the disaster. The use of *Talanoa*[i] respected cultural values and created a welcoming environment for sharing, which is crucial post-disaster.

- The focus on locally led response and partnership evidences the critical role of local organisations. These organisations coordinated and worked with existing national processes and systems in Tonga, and they continued to engage with communities post-disaster to support recovery.
- Grounding the evaluation in local expertise, frameworks and values is invaluable. The evaluation has contextual relevance and cultural alignment with those affected by the disaster. This approach fostered a supportive space for individuals to share their experiences, facilitating a space for healing and recovery post-disaster.

Source: Low et al (2023).

i Talanoa is 'a personal encounter where people story their issues, their realities and aspirations'. This approach 'allows more mo'oni (pure, real, authentic) information to be available for Pacific research than data derived from other research methods'. See Vaioleti (2006).

11.3 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CRISIS

KEY MESSAGES

- EHA can capture the consequences of the climate crisis on the humanitarian system, and also show how humanitarian action contributes to or mitigates this crisis.
- When evaluating how humanitarian action takes account of the environment and climate crisis, explore how local and/or Indigenous knowledge, practices and solutions have been considered.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Man-made environmental degradation is driving interlinked crises, including the climate crisis, biodiversity loss and the spread of infectious diseases (Chaplowe and Uitto, 2022; Hauer and Wahlström, 2023). Droughts and floods brought about by the climate crisis can significantly increase humanitarian needs by contributing to displacement, instability and violence.

In line with the principle to 'Do No Harm', it is increasingly important to consider environmental factors in humanitarian action and efforts to minimise negative environmental impacts. EHA can provide evidence on the consequences of the climate crisis on the humanitarian system, and support learning on mitigation measures. EHA can also hold the humanitarian system to account if/when actions contribute to the climate crisis.

Consider including the environment and climate crisis in evaluations, even when these aspects are not addressed explicitly in humanitarian action.

INTENTIONAL USE OF THE PRIORITY THEME IN EVALUATION

KEY AREAS OF ENQUIRY

Follow key lines of enquiry at different levels. Since progress still needs to be made in regularly integrating the environment and climate crisis into humanitarian action, a first step is to evaluate if any environmental mitigation measures have been planned and implemented.

- **Organisational level:** Explore if an organisation-wide policy or strategy is in place on the environment and climate crisis, if there is an environmental management system and associated action plan, and the extent to which these are applied in practice (Hauer and Wahlström, 2023).

- **Humanitarian response level:** Depending on context, explore water use management, waste management, reduction of carbon emissions, choices of energy solutions, and/or whether the humanitarian response has taken measures to protect habitats and their inhabitants. Consider if the humanitarian response minimised environmental damage to areas affected by crisis, in terms of deforestation, biodiversity loss and the degradation of natural resources (Haruhiru et al, 2023). Have day-to-day operational management decisions protected the environment — such as in the supply chain, fleet management, travel, and information and communication technology? The environment and climate crisis is particularly important in WASH, shelter and food security, and livelihood programmes, and in logistics and human resources. Remember environmental effects and actions taken to reduce them are often context-specific.

- **Local and/or Indigenous knowledge and practice:** Evaluate if the design and implementation of the humanitarian response have considered local and/or Indigenous knowledge and practice. Has humanitarian action adapted to the local context, and has it valued and integrated local and Indigenous solutions? Local actors have in-depth knowledge of their environments and may deliver more environmentally sustainable assistance (Haruhiru et al, 2023).

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Key consideration A

Some aspects of the environment and climate crisis may be difficult to analyse, especially in rapidly evolving contexts.

Methodological implications for commissioners

Ensure appropriate expertise on the evaluation team. Include those with knowledge on local issues and practices related to the environment and climate crisis, as team members or as advisers.

Methodological implications for evaluators

Use the inception phase to explore alternative information sources within and outside the humanitarian system, including local environmental experts who could serve as key informants.

Key consideration B

Access to relevant data is crucial, for example on humanitarian actors' greenhouse gas emissions and on issues such as deforestation and biodiversity loss. However, such data may not be readily available or may be outdated, as this theme is not yet prioritised by humanitarian actors. Complex and fluid operating environments add to data scarcity.

Methodological implications for commissioners

Consider the potential lack of data when planning your evaluation. Facilitate access to relevant information from different sources.

Methodological implications for evaluators

Use the inception phase to explore data availability, including secondary data from development actors, academia or governmental agencies. Consider that environmental assessments can exist in various forms.

EVALUATION EXAMPLE

Evaluation of WFP's emergency response in Myanmar (2018–2022) (October 2023)

Background

This evaluation assesses WFP's emergency response in Myanmar from September 2017 to December 2022. It evaluates if the organisation met its accountability requirements, and it identifies learning to inform a new interim country strategic plan for Myanmar and WFP's emergency response practice globally.

How the evaluation addresses the environment and climate crisis

The evaluation addresses environmental sustainability under the inter-connection criterion (albeit labelled connectedness).

The TOR includes a specific question on environmental sustainability. The evaluation matrix breaks this down into: 1) the use of risk matrices and mitigation measures, 2) knowledge and application by staff of social and environmental standards, 3) degree to which assessments are performed, and 4) degree to which staff apply environmental and social risk sensitivity.

The evaluation explores the use of different tools related to the environment by the country office, sub-offices and partners, noting evolution from basic environmental screening checklists to expanded environmental and social standards and new screening tools. The evaluation also examines mitigation measures in specific projects, such as terraced land development to reduce slash-and-burn practices in hilly regions and the distribution of fuel-efficient stoves. It includes one recommendation linked to the environment.

- Linking findings at country level and sub-office level to WFP organisational standards on the environment provides an appropriate reference point, enabling an evaluative judgement to be made.
- Including a recommendation related to the environment ensures that these issues are followed up by management.

Source: WFP (2023b).