

CHAPTER 2

GETTING STARTED: DEFINITIONS AND KEY TERMS

2.1 HUMANITARIAN DEFINITIONS¹

HUMANITARIAN ACTION

*The objectives of humanitarian action are to protect and save lives, to alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of crises, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for the occurrence of such situations.*²

EVALUATION OF HUMANITARIAN ACTION

*EHA is the systematic and objective examination of humanitarian action to determine the worth or significance of an activity, policy or programme, with the intention to draw lessons to improve policy and practice and enhance accountability.*³

2.2 WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT EHA?

This guide takes into account a number of challenges specific to EHA in how definitions are adapted from the OECD criteria and their methodological implications.⁴

Conflict, often a cause of humanitarian crises: In EHA, a robust context analysis is needed to understand the political economy of the conflict, which in turn informs an understanding and evaluation of:

- a. whether the humanitarian response has been sufficiently conflict-sensitive and has succeeded in 'doing no harm' in terms of negative consequences for the population affected by the crisis, for example by aggravating conflict dynamics (see CDA, n.d.)
- b. if and how access has been negotiated with conflict actors

¹ See [Annex 1](#) for a glossary of other useful terms.

² This definition of humanitarian action is adapted from that in ALNAP (2016), to add and reflect the centrality of protection. As well as having their basic needs met, those affected by crisis also need protection – from violence, abuse, coercion and deprivation – and respect for their rights in accordance with the letter and spirit of relevant bodies of law (IASC, 2016).

³ This definition is drawn from ALNAP (2016).

⁴ See ALNAP (2016) for further explanation of some of these challenges and how to address them.

- c. issues of security and whether a humanitarian actor has adequately addressed duty of care to its staff.

This analysis is also key to understanding and evaluating whether protection needs have been adequately assessed and met.

Accessing and consulting people affected by crisis: Insecurity due to conflict has many consequences. This includes limited or lack of access by evaluators to areas and communities affected by a crisis; people being traumatised, fearful and distrustful of evaluators and possibly of members of their own and other communities; and polarised perspectives. Evaluators need flexible ways to reach those affected, including remote methods and sensitive methods of data collection so all perspectives can be heard. Infrastructural damage from natural hazard may constrain access and cause trauma too.

Lack of documents and reference points: The dynamic, often fast-paced, and sometimes unplanned yet responsive nature of humanitarian action can pose challenges for evaluation. Creativity and adaptability may be needed to find appropriate reference points where there is an absence of planning documents and changing objectives, characterised by an iterative rather than linear approach (see [Annex 2](#) for pointers on adaptive management).

Attribution challenges and power dynamics: Some challenges are common but amplified in EHA. This includes attributing results to a specific action or actor where there may be many humanitarian actors involved, lack of clear responsibility between them, and an unclear relationship between international and national/local actors. Unequal power dynamics can play a part in the latter, which raises issues of who sets the agenda for an evaluation, what is valued and whose perspective counts. Some standards and ethical frameworks for humanitarian action are widely accepted across actors, but they are not universal, as shown in [section 2.5 Relating the criteria to humanitarian principles](#).

Defining the boundaries of humanitarian action: In many crises, those fulfilling a humanitarian role may have multiple mandates, particularly among national and local actors. And international development actors may also be present. This raises issues for defining what counts as 'humanitarian action' to be evaluated, and which population groups are affected directly or indirectly by a humanitarian crisis, as opposed to facing development needs. How could or should humanitarian action relate to engagement for development and peacebuilding, in the spirit of the humanitarian–development–peacebuilding nexus? These issues are particularly acute in protracted humanitarian crises.

2.3 CRITERIA AND PRIORITY THEMES: WHAT ARE THEY?

Evaluation criteria provide a normative framework to determine the merit or worth of humanitarian action.⁵ In other words, they describe a comprehensive list of the desired attributes of humanitarian action, namely that it should:

- be relevant to the context and appropriate to those affected by crisis – **relevance**⁶
- reach those most in need – **coverage and inclusion**
- achieve desired results and avoid harmful consequences – **effectiveness**
- deliver results in an efficient way – **efficiency**
- be connected to other forms of development and peacebuilding activity, with a medium- to long-term perspective – **inter-connection** (formerly *connectedness*)
- be complementary, coordinated and consistent across humanitarian actors, aligning with policies and standards – **coherence**
- make a positive difference – **impact**.

Note, as described in [Chapter 3](#), not all criteria will apply to every evaluation of humanitarian action. This is an exhaustive list from which those commissioning the evaluation should select.

The criteria are ordered deliberately. They put people affected by crisis centre-stage in evaluating relevance and coverage, then they consider the effectiveness and efficiency of programmes, then the more complex and systemic concepts of inter-connection and coherence, and they end with the wider and potentially transformative impact of humanitarian action.

Some of these criteria align directly with the OECD criteria. For others, we have adapted and nuanced the definition to specifically suit humanitarian action. Two additional criteria are particularly important for EHA, building on the ALNAP guide (2006): coverage and inclusion, and inter-connection.⁷ [Table 1](#) summarises alignment and divergence between ALNAP's EHA criteria and the OECD criteria.

5 This is adapted from the OECD DAC definition – 'A criterion is a standard or principle used in evaluation as the basis for evaluative judgement' (OECD, 2021: 18) – in order for us to make a clear distinction with the priority themes.

6 In the 2006 guide relevance is combined with appropriateness. In this updated guide the two levels of analysis are maintained, but appropriateness no longer features in the name of the criterion.

7 However, the OECD (2021) acknowledges that, in humanitarian contexts, the additional criteria of appropriateness (folded here into relevance), coverage and connectedness may be highly relevant to evaluation.

Table 1: OECD criteria and ALNAP's adapted criteria for EHA

OECD evaluation criteria (2019)	EHA criteria (2025)	Similarities and differences in ALNAP's EHA criteria
Relevance	 Relevance	Similar definition but further unpacked for EHA to consider the appropriateness of humanitarian action to needs and priorities of people affected by crisis, with less focus on policy alignment (which is addressed under coherence).
	 Coverage and inclusion	Specific to EHA to evaluate the extent to which humanitarian action is needs-based and therefore impartial (in turn relating to the widely accepted humanitarian principle of impartiality), and provided without discrimination.
Effectiveness	 Effectiveness	Same definition but further unpacked for EHA to emphasise outcomes.
Efficiency	 Efficiency	Similar, looking at three dimensions of efficiency: economic efficiency, operational efficiency and timeliness.
Sustainability	 Inter-connection	The OECD criterion considers how the net benefits of an intervention are likely to continue. But this is not always appropriate for humanitarian action, which is often of a short-term nature. Instead, inter-connection evaluates the extent to which (usually short-term) humanitarian action takes the medium and longer term into account, and thus how it also connects to development and peacebuilding actors, with a temporal perspective.
Coherence	 Coherence	<p>Similar elements in consistency and complementarity of action, avoiding duplication of effort and ensuring added value. The EHA definition specifically focuses on coordination of humanitarian action to achieve this; OECD refers to this as 'external coherence'.</p> <p>Both definitions refer to alignment with international norms and standards, and with wider policy frameworks. EHA further considers how tensions between policies and standards are managed in practice.</p> <p>OECD considers 'internal coherence' in terms of synergy and links between interventions within the same institution. This is where it places the humanitarian–development–peacebuilding nexus. But for EHA, the nexus is placed under inter-connection, encouraging an external and temporal perspective of the relationship between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors.</p>
Impact	 Impact	Similar, looking at the higher-level and transformative effects in different domains.

The priority themes, as introduced in [Chapter 1](#), provide an additional lens to evaluate humanitarian action. They complement the OECD criteria and offer opportunities for evaluation to enhance performance and also support transformational change, often at system level. The priority themes are:

- **Putting people affected by crisis at the centre** (linked to efforts within the humanitarian system to improve how humanitarian actors engage with affected people)
- **Locally led humanitarian action** (also referred to as localisation within the humanitarian system)
- **Environment and climate crisis.**

To varying degrees, these priorities are reflected as sub-themes within the OECD criteria. Consider giving explicit attention to some of these issues to generate more specific and relevant evaluation questions that, if answered, can drive substantial change. This is where evaluation can support transformational change.

At the same time, you may prefer to explore these themes within the existing criteria framework. In such cases, use the guide to inform more targeted questions and lines of enquiry within those criteria.

Table 2: EHA priority themes

Priority theme	What is it and why is it important?
Putting people affected by crisis at the centre	<p>Evaluates the extent to which humanitarian action: a) meaningfully involves affected people in decision-making, b) recognises their agency, c) ensures their protection, and d) is grounded in their needs, priorities and aspirations.</p> <p>Despite commitments, deep-rooted power imbalances limit whether humanitarian actors are genuinely led by people affected by crisis. Evaluations can examine the extent to which humanitarian actors are being led by or are responding to the preferences and priorities of people affected by crisis in a timely manner; the quality of engagement, including cultural sensitivity and power and trust between humanitarian actors and communities; and if the perspectives of people affected by crisis have been listened to and acted upon.</p>

Priority theme	What is it and why is it important?
Locally led humanitarian action	<p>Evaluates the degree to which humanitarian action: a) supports local actors, b) shifts power and resources to frontline responders, and c) reinforces locally owned crisis response and recovery.</p> <p>Evaluations can examine local actors' leadership (or lack thereof) in humanitarian action and explore structural and operational barriers that limit their influence, recommending how these barriers can be overcome. Evaluations can also assess variations in local actors' values, priorities and power dynamics, and how this shapes local actors' leadership and relationships with communities affected by crisis (e.g. their role in the inclusion or exclusion of certain groups in receiving humanitarian assistance).</p>
Environment and climate crisis	<p>Evaluates the extent to which humanitarian action: a) contributes to or mitigates the climate crisis, and b) considers local and/or Indigenous knowledge, practices and solutions around the environment and climate crisis.</p> <p>The climate crisis can significantly increase humanitarian needs, contributing to displacement, instability and violence through climate-related events like droughts and floods. In line with the principle of 'Do No Harm', consider environmental factors in how humanitarian action is planned and implemented, and whether it minimises negative environmental impacts.</p>

Note, you may be asked to consider important **cross-cutting issues** throughout the evaluation process, and under a number (if not all) of the evaluation criteria. Different organisations may have their own cross-cutting issues to be considered in EHA. ALNAP's *EHA guide* (2006) identifies eight cross-cutting issues.⁸ We consider two in this guide:

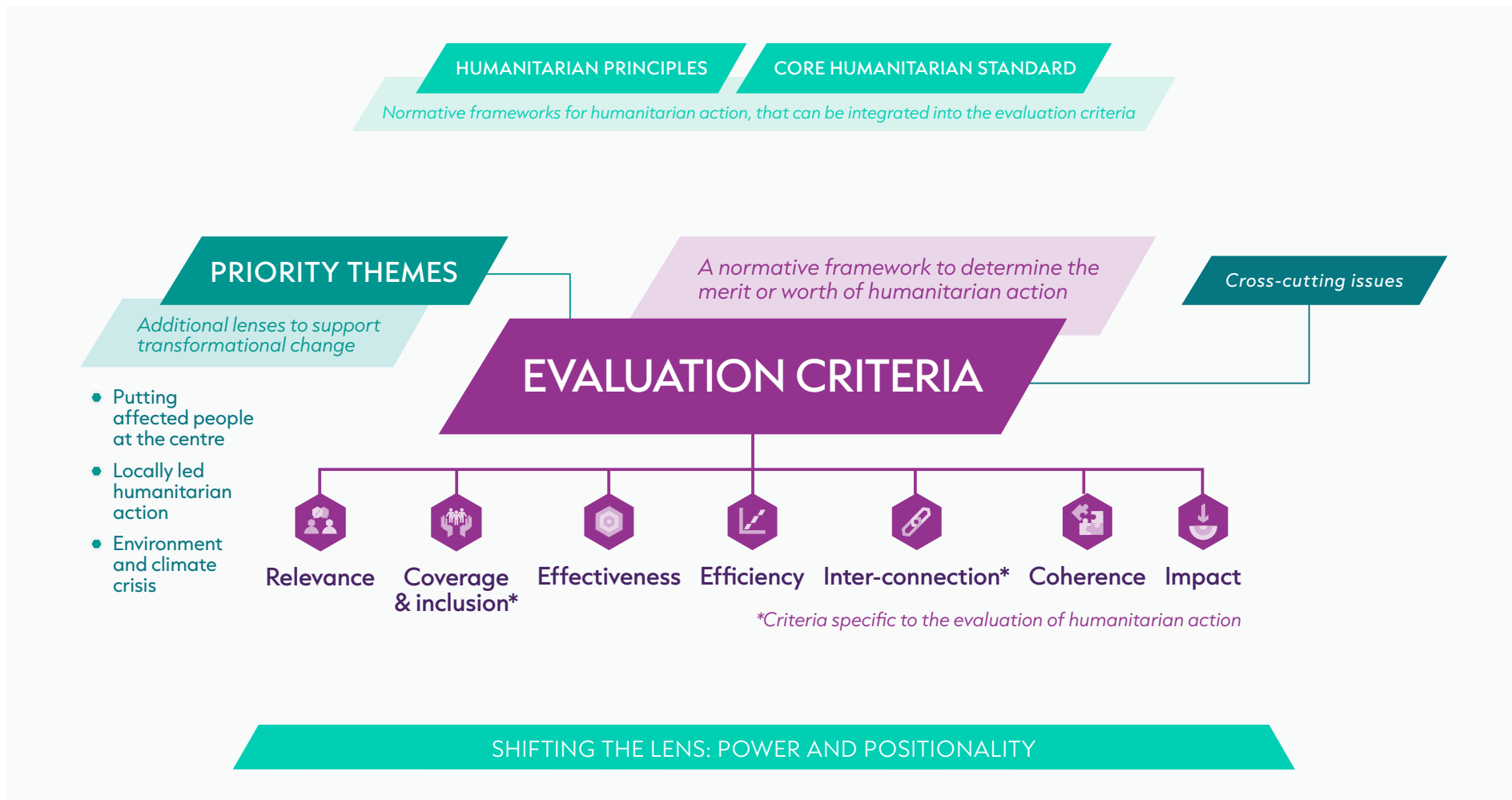
- **Inclusion:** although now elevated to being part of the coverage criterion, inclusion can also be considered for all other criteria. It includes and goes beyond gender equality to consider other patterns of marginalisation and discrimination as well, and, as far as possible, their underlying causes.
- **Adaptiveness/adaptive management:** this is key to effective and relevant humanitarian action, given the dynamic and unpredictable nature of crises and the fast-paced nature of humanitarian action.

These cross-cutting issues are described in [Annex 2](#), where they are applied to the criteria.

Figure 3 summarises the different elements of the guide.

⁸ The cross-cutting 'themes' in the EHA guide (ALNAP, 2006) are: local context; human resources; protection; participation of primary stakeholders; coping strategies and resilience; gender equality; HIV/AIDS; and the environment. Protection is now regarded as central to humanitarian action and is integrated throughout this guide. Some others now appear as priority themes or they are woven into this guide.

Figure 3: Different elements of this guide



2.4 SHIFTING THE LENS: POWER AND POSITIONALITY

Chapters 4–10 discuss the seven EHA criteria in turn, and each includes a ‘Shifting the lens: power and positionality’ section. These sections explore how power dynamics and positionality shape evaluations and interpretations of criteria. They prompt reflection on what is evaluated, how and by whom – inviting shifts that enhance the fairness, accuracy and relevance of findings. Key examples are given, but there are many facets to addressing power and positionality that this guide does not cover. This requires ongoing reflection, adaptation and dialogue within each unique context.

Why is this important? Positionality shapes how you perceive the world and carry out evaluations, based on your social identities, experiences and affiliations – whether you are an evaluator, commissioner or programme staff. It affects which questions you ask, whose knowledge you prioritise, and how you frame and use findings. Crucially, positionality can introduce bias, often subtly – for example, by reinforcing dominant narratives or privileging certain voices over others. By recognising positionality and power, the guide invites you to shift your lens to uncover blind spots, challenge inherited assumptions and engage more equitably with diverse forms of knowledge in evaluation.

2.5 RELATING THE CRITERIA TO HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES

If the humanitarian actor that is the focus of the evaluation is committed to humanitarian principles as the ethical or even legal framework for its humanitarian action, these principles should be integrated into all standard evaluations of its humanitarian action. However, there is a poor track record in doing this.⁹ Here, we explain how to integrate humanitarian principles within the framework of the EHA criteria.

BOX 1: WHAT ARE HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES?

Humanitarian principles form a normative framework for humanitarian action. They are rooted in International Humanitarian Law, with particular relevance to conflict contexts. The principles are intended to: a) distinguish humanitarian response from other forms of assistance in terms of how it is provided; b) provide access to conflict zones, by assuring parties to armed conflict that humanitarian activities will not interfere in the conflict; c) provide an ethical compass for humanitarian agencies to navigate difficult choices and dilemmas in humanitarian action (UNEG, 2024).

⁹ See UNEG (2024) and also UNEG (2016a), which find few references to humanitarian principles in evaluations of humanitarian action.

Humanitarian principles

Humanity: Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings.

Impartiality: Humanitarian action must be carried out based on need alone, prioritising the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions.

Neutrality: Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

Independence: Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.

Source: OCHA (2022).

To whom do the principles apply?

Many international humanitarian actors state their commitment to these humanitarian principles as their normative framework.¹⁰ But these principles are not followed universally by all humanitarian actors. They may not be relevant to some regional, national and local humanitarian actors – particularly the principles of neutrality and independence if they identify more closely with concepts of humanitarian solidarity and resistance,¹¹ and/or have their roots in other forms of civic action such as rights-based advocacy or peacebuilding.

HOW DO HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES RELATE TO ALNAP'S EVALUATION CRITERIA?












Humanitarian principles do not map directly onto the EHA criteria. However, evaluation questions about the role of humanitarian principles in guiding decision-making and humanitarian action can usually be linked to one or other of the criteria.

At the end of each chapter, this guide suggests how and where to integrate humanitarian principles within the framework of the evaluation criteria. [Table 3](#) provides a summary.

¹⁰ This includes the International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, UN agencies engaged in humanitarian action, many international NGOs (INGOs) and some donor governments.

¹¹ Humanitarian resistance has been described as the rescue, relief and protection of people suffering under an unjust enemy regime, by individuals and groups politically opposed to the regime. Thus, humanitarian resistance means taking sides. Solidarity is a commitment to unity and a common cause, which may mean 'resisting' enemy power. Once again, this means taking sides rather than remaining neutral (Slim, 2022).

Table 3: How the humanitarian principles relate to the criteria

Humanitarian principle	Closest related criteria	Explanation
Humanity	 Relevance	Evaluate the purpose of humanitarian action in terms of protecting life and health. Also, evaluate if humanitarian action respects the dignity of people affected by crisis.
	 Coverage and inclusion	Evaluate whether needs and suffering have been addressed wherever they have been found.
Impartiality	 Coverage and inclusion	Evaluate access to people affected by crisis, and whether the scale of humanitarian action is proportionate to need.
Neutrality	 Effectiveness	As an 'instrumental' principle to gain access, neutrality may be key to effectiveness.
	 Efficiency	Explore how the human resource composition of the respective organisation protects neutrality, and the perception of neutrality.
	 Inter-connection	Explore if the relationship between humanitarian and other actors respects humanitarian principles, and how that is perceived by the affected population.
Independence	 Effectiveness	See explanation for neutrality.
	 Efficiency	Explore if funding decisions have taken 'independence' into account.
	 Inter-connection	See explanation for neutrality.
All humanitarian principles	 Coherence	Explore overall alignment of humanitarian action with humanitarian principles, and how trade-offs between humanitarian principles have been managed.
	 Impact	Explore the overall impact of principled (or non-principled) humanitarian action across the whole response.

2.6 A NOTE ON THE CORE HUMANITARIAN STANDARD (CHS)

When evaluating an organisation that is committed to the CHS, these can also be mapped onto the evaluation criteria (CHS, 2024). See [Annex 3](#) on the CHS and the EHA criteria.