



## CHAPTER 4

# RELEVANCE

### DEFINITION

Is humanitarian action doing the right things?

Relevance<sup>17</sup> refers to whether humanitarian action is in line with the needs and priorities of people affected by crisis in each specific context, and with the needs and priorities of institutions and partners, at macro and micro levels.<sup>18</sup>

### KEY MESSAGES

- Centre your evaluation of relevance on understanding the needs and priorities of different groups and communities within the population affected by crisis, and how/if these needs and priorities have informed the design and implementation of humanitarian action.
- Your positionality as an evaluator influences how you understand, interpret and prioritise the needs and priorities of different stakeholders. Reflect on how different factors such as cultural background and organisational affiliation influence your judgement.

### EXPLANATION OF DEFINITION, AND HOW TO USE THIS CRITERION

#### EXPLANATION OF THE DEFINITION

The relevance of humanitarian action may be evaluated at macro and micro levels (where it is also referred to as appropriateness). The macro level refers to *what* –

<sup>17</sup> In 2006, ALNAP combined relevance with appropriateness; in this updated guide the two levels of analysis are maintained but appropriateness no longer features in the criterion's name.

<sup>18</sup> The OECD definition of relevance also includes policy alignment which, in this guide, is covered under coherence.

evaluation of the overall objectives or purpose of humanitarian action; the micro level refers to *how* – evaluation of the type and mode of assistance, including inputs and activities.

Unpack and interrogate the logic or theory of change of the humanitarian response. For example, decreasing morbidity and mortality may be a relevant overall objective for humanitarian action, but strengthening the quality of secondary health care in an area by staffing and rehabilitating a hospital might not be appropriate to achieve this objective. It might be more appropriate to strengthen primary health care structures, engaging with Indigenous health care providers, or to simply facilitate people's access to existing structures by providing transportation.

Analyse the context and explore the different needs and priorities of people affected by crisis. Review any needs assessments that have informed the design of the response. As highlighted in the OECD definition, consider that there might be potential tensions between the needs and priorities of affected people and those of other stakeholders, such as humanitarian responders and institutional partners. There may be some tensions between the short-term nature of humanitarian action and people's long-term needs for stability and to rebuild their lives. For example, a humanitarian actor might prioritise building latrines for a community affected by crisis to meet international standards, but community members put greater value on the building of schools. There might also be tensions between the needs and priorities of different groups and communities within the population affected by crisis, meaning that trade-offs have been made. What is of value for one stakeholder or group might not be of value to others. Explore these tensions and the implications of the choices made (OECD, 2019, 2021; Darcy and Dillon, 2020).

Explore if issues related to the environment and climate crisis have been considered in the design and implementation of humanitarian action. Were the environmental context and the environmental knowledge and practices of people affected by crisis considered to deliver relevant assistance? This is further explained in [section 11.3 Environment and climate crisis](#).

Also explore how conflict-related factors have affected the relevance of humanitarian action. For example, certain types of humanitarian assistance may be irrelevant at local level if they leave people more vulnerable to attack. In some contexts, a household may become a target if livestock is restocked where there is a high risk of looting by militia or if cash is distributed. This is conflict-insensitive programming and it fails to respect the principle of 'Do No Harm', with negative consequences for protection.

As an aspect of relevance, evaluate participation and ownership by key stakeholders – especially people affected by crisis – in the design and implementation of humanitarian action. What is the nature of the overall relationship between humanitarian actors and affected people and how has this relationship influenced the relevance of the response? How were needs assessments and other assessments conducted? Were key stakeholders, including affected people, involved in designing the humanitarian response? What

feedback channels were there to ensure continued relevance? Also evaluate the role of local actors in the design of the humanitarian response. How satisfied are local actors with their level of involvement and influence in shaping the purpose and activities of the response? These aspects can help explain why humanitarian action is or is not relevant. This is further explained in [section 11.1 Putting people affected by crisis at the centre](#).

## WHEN TO SELECT RELEVANCE

Relevance should be widely used as an EHA criterion to understand if humanitarian action has been designed and implemented to do the right things to respond to need. Irrelevant assistance could have severe and harmful consequences for the well-being of people affected by crisis.

## HOW RELEVANCE RELATES TO OTHER CRITERIA

When relevance is combined with coverage and inclusion, the evaluation explores whether humanitarian action is doing the right things for the right people, i.e. those in greatest need.

When relevance is combined with effectiveness, the evaluation provides an overview of what has been achieved and how well, and also if humanitarian action is doing the right things. Humanitarian action might be highly effective in achieving the desired results set out in a funding proposal, but irrelevant to the needs and priorities of people affected by crisis. For example, if protection risks and needs have been ignored in the design and implementation of humanitarian action, an evaluation focused on effectiveness might draw different conclusions to one focused on relevance and effectiveness (ALNAP, 2018).

## SHIFTING THE LENS: POWER AND POSITIONALITY

Exploring relevance through the lens of power and positionality asks you to consider: How does your positionality as an evaluator shape your assumptions about whose needs matter? How might your line of evaluation questioning reproduce power imbalances or silence alternative viewpoints on what constitutes the 'right' needs, knowledge or solutions?

For example, when reporting whether humanitarian action is relevant, examine whether your conclusions reinforce paternalistic narratives – such as framing people affected by crisis solely as passive recipients of humanitarian assistance – and diminish local agency or leadership in shaping responses.

Shifting the lens could also mean that triangulation compares data sources and actively interrogates divergences in perspectives between local actors, community members and external stakeholders.

## METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

See [Chapter 11](#) for further methodological implications, particularly key considerations related to putting people affected by crisis at the centre.

### Key consideration A

Evaluating the relevance of humanitarian action requires local expertise. This is to gain sufficient understanding of context and local needs, particularly in quickly changing and/or highly volatile environments.

#### Methodological implications for commissioners

Ensure that local experts are included on the evaluation team. Ensure these experts have knowledge and experience from the specific geographical area covered by the evaluation, and of the population groups covered. Gain up-to-date information on the local context to ensure that the composition of the evaluation team is conflict-sensitive.

#### Methodological implications for evaluators

If your evaluation team comprises members from multiple countries and/or communities, make sure that local expert(s) are given a key role and that they contribute to the overall analysis of the evaluation, not just data collection.

Pay attention to your positionality as an evaluator, and how you may be perceived in conflict contexts to ensure a conflict-sensitive approach. For example, ethnic or national identities may impact the evaluation team's interaction with people affected by crisis and other key stakeholders.

### Key consideration B

There may be many different perspectives and a lack of consensus on what constitutes relevant humanitarian action. This makes an evaluative judgement difficult.

#### Methodological implications for commissioners

Encourage and facilitate data triangulation by helping evaluators identify multiple and relevant data sources. Facilitate access to different stakeholders and to different groups and communities within the affected population.

#### Methodological implications for evaluators

Take account of the inherent power dynamics in the humanitarian system when evaluating relevance – between people affected by crisis and humanitarian actors, but also among different affected groups, communities and humanitarian actors. Ensure the perspectives of different groups and communities, including the marginalised, are heard and given weight in reaching an evaluative judgement. Be transparent in how the evaluative judgement has been made.

## EVALUATION EXAMPLE

### Evaluation of BHA RESTORE II in northwest Syria (September 2022)

#### Background

The RESTORE II programme was implemented in northwest Syria in 2021 and 2022 by the international humanitarian agency GOAL and several Syrian organisations, including the Big Heart Foundation and Ihsan. It distributed food kits and cash vouchers, delivered water supply services and raised awareness around malnutrition and residential building rehabilitation. The evaluation explores the extent to which synergies between programmes/sectors were appropriate for the most vulnerable members of the population.

#### How the evaluation addresses relevance at the micro level

The evaluators surveyed people affected by the crisis to understand whether the different services offered by the programme were appropriate to their needs.

The evaluation indicates how programme participants rated the appropriateness of each service, showing differences between participants who benefited from one or more service. Survey results are disaggregated by types of service and gender. The evaluators draw conclusions on the appropriateness of different services and also a combination of services. They dig into why these differences occurred, drawing on interviews and focus group discussions with affected people. Links are made with needs assessments conducted at the beginning of the programme.

- The evaluation illustrates the value of investigating how different activities are perceived by different groups of people affected by crisis. Some activities can be appropriate to the needs of affected people and other activities less so.
- Important learning for programme design can emerge from an in-depth understanding of differences in relevancy within one programme.

*Source: Jouri (2022).*

## EVALUATION EXAMPLE

### Evaluation of UNHCR's response to the L3 emergency in Afghanistan 2021–2022 (March 2023)

#### Background

A rapid onset humanitarian crisis occurred in Afghanistan when the Taliban forces took power in August 2021. Around 18 million of the country's 38 million people needed assistance, facing worsening conditions and mounting food insecurity. The evaluation focuses on operations during the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) internally displaced persons (IDP) response from August 2021 to May 2022, with the dual purpose of learning and accountability.

#### How the evaluation addresses relevance at the macro level

The evaluators first explore which needs assessments were undertaken, if data from protection monitoring tools was considered, and if those assessments allowed satisfactory understanding of the needs of people affected by the crisis, including people with 'specific needs'. The evaluation also explores the use of feedback mechanisms and if additional needs assessments were conducted to respond to changes in the context. The evaluation team conducted focus group discussions with affected people to capture their perspectives on the relevance of the response. Alignment between programme documents and needs is evaluated to explore linkages between response design and needs assessments. The evaluation highlights the tension between the priority needs of people affected by crisis and UNHCR's ability to meet those needs, considering UNHCR's mandate and responsibility.

- The evaluation shows the logical link between needs assessments, feedback mechanisms and the relevance of a response, also showing how primary data collection with affected people can corroborate findings from a desk review.
- The evaluation also illustrates the tensions between humanitarian actors' mandates and priorities, and the needs of people affected by crisis.

Source: UNHCR (2023a).

## HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES AND RELEVANCE

This is an opportunity to evaluate the principle of humanity, which is the purpose of humanitarian action: to protect life and health. How well do humanitarian actors understand the needs and priorities of people affected by crisis in order to achieve this purpose? Relevance relates closely to the principle of impartiality too, prioritising assistance according to need.

Humanity is also about ensuring respect for human beings. In evaluating relevance, look for evidence that humanitarian action and the modalities of assistance do indeed respect and promote the dignity of those affected by a crisis. Pay attention to the nature of the relationship between the respective agency(ies) and affected people. For all lines of enquiry, it is essential that you listen to the perspectives and experience of affected people.

Example evaluation question:

*To what extent was assistance provided according to the needs and priorities of people affected by crisis, in ways that respected their dignity, according to the principles of humanity and impartiality?*