



CHAPTER 9

COHERENCE

DEFINITION

How complementary, coordinated and consistent is humanitarian action across different actors?

Coherence refers to: a) complementarity and coordination of humanitarian action between actors engaged in humanitarian work; and b) alignment with and consistency between policies and standards, both at organisational and system-wide levels.²⁸

KEY MESSAGES

- Coordination is key to the operational dimension of coherence, to ensure humanitarian actors add value and avoid duplication so that the whole of the humanitarian response is 'greater than the sum of its parts'.
- Complementarity between internationally led and locally led humanitarian action pays attention to power imbalances in the humanitarian system, and how this can constrain or disadvantage local leadership and agency.
- To evaluate the policy dimension of coherence, explore if humanitarian action aligns with international and national policies, if policies and standards are consistent, and how tensions between them have been managed in practice.

²⁸ This definition differs significantly from that in ALNAP's 2006 *EHA guide*, which is rooted in the response to the Rwanda crisis in 1996 where the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda (JEEAR) concluded that international humanitarian action was a substitute for international political inaction (Borton et al, 1996). In that edition, coherence focuses on consistency between security, developmental, trade and military policies with humanitarian policy. This is outdated and inconsistent with principled humanitarian action. Stakeholders consulted for this 2025 edition requested an updated definition and guidance, unpacking what the criterion means. OECD first used the coherence criterion for development and humanitarian evaluation in 2019.

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?