



**MONITORING &  
EVALUATION**

**ALNAP**

# **Review of the OECD DAC criteria for evaluating humanitarian action**

**SUMMARY BRIEF**

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ALNAP is a global network of NGOs, UN agencies, members of the Red Cross/Crescent Movement, donors, academics and consultants dedicated to learning how to improve response to humanitarian crises.

**[www.alnap.org](http://www.alnap.org)**

### **About the authors**

**Jo-Hannah Lavey** is a Principal Consultant at Alinea International with 20 years' experience in humanitarian action across four continents. She has a deep passion for improving outcomes for those affected by crisis.

**Christina Northey** is a Senior Consultant at Alinea International with over 25 years' experience in humanitarian program design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation in Asia and the Pacific, Middle East and Africa.

**David Poulton** is an Associate Consultant at Alinea International with experience in research, design, and monitoring and evaluation of humanitarian and development programs throughout Asia and the Pacific.

**Claire Bowyer** is an Associate Consultant at Alinea International with over 5 years' experience in the delivery, monitoring, and evaluation of humanitarian and development projects across Asia, the Middle East, and the Pacific.

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The project is managed by Susanna Morrison-Métois, a Senior Research Fellow for Evaluation and Learning at ALNAP.

A global advisory group provided oversight, advice and guidance. The advisory group is chaired by John Mitchel (ALNAP). Advisory group members include:

Helene Juillard, Evaluation Consultant  
Henri Van den idert, UNHCR  
Kassem El Saddik, Evaluation Consultant  
Katy Bobin, independent  
Margie Buchanan-Smith, Evaluation Consultant  
Megan Kennedy-Chouane, OECD DAC  
Michael Carbon, WFP  
Miki Tsukamoto, International Federation of the Red Cross  
Neelofar Shahzad, independent  
Olivia Roberts/ Michele Tarsilla, UNICEF  
Sylvestre Musengimana, Evaluation Consultant

The views contained in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of ALNAP members.

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Design by Soapbox, [www.soapbox.co.uk](http://www.soapbox.co.uk)

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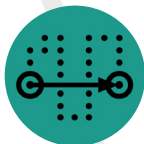
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# THE OECD DAC EVALUATION CRITERIA IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION: WHAT DO WE KNOW?

What are the key challenges and issues associated with applying the OECD DAC criteria in evaluations of humanitarian action?

What can we learn from examining these challenges and how can we use this learning to improve existing guidance?

These were the guiding questions for recent ALNAP research, and the findings are captured in this summary brief. ALNAP has already produced the most widely consulted guidance on the OECD DAC criteria and their use in humanitarian evaluations. But this guidance is more than 15 years old and needs a refresh. In seeking to update its guidance, ALNAP commissioned a review to gather and analyse perspectives from written sources to help inform a wider consultation process. The purpose is to gather evidence to help rewrite the ALNAP guidance on the use of evaluation criteria in humanitarian settings.

This brief highlights the key messages from the main research paper, available [here](#). It includes a summary of each of the seven OECD DAC criteria as defined in ALNAP's 2006 guide. The final section reviews cross-cutting issues and potential additional criteria. Each of the sections include definitions and a summary of key issues, followed by questions for further exploration.

## Background

In 2006, ALNAP published [Evaluating humanitarian action using the OECD DAC Criteria, an ALNAP guide for humanitarian agencies](#). The OECD DAC evaluation criteria are the pre-eminent criteria for evaluating development and humanitarian assistance (Kennedy-Chouane 2020, Picciotto 2013, cited in Patton 2020). As updated in 2019, the six criteria are: **effectiveness, relevance, efficiency, impact, sustainability and coherence**. ALNAP's 2006 guide interprets the criteria for application in humanitarian action as: **effectiveness, appropriateness/relevance, efficiency, impact, coverage, coherence and connectedness**.

## Strengths

The OECD DAC evaluation criteria are widely applied – even more so than originally expected (Lundgren 2017). This has important advantages. It makes evaluation synthesis easier, helps to capture common weaknesses in humanitarian action, and makes it easier for evaluators across the globe to work with each other (ALNAP 2016). Lundgren (2017) observes that the criteria are relatively easy to understand and use, and cover the key issues that are important to consider when assessing the performance of an intervention.

## Common issues in applying OECD DAC criteria to humanitarian action

As can be expected, such popular and widely applied criteria have been subject to critique. Some of the broader criticisms include an inability to evaluate transformational change (Patton 2020; Ofir 2017), and an insufficient focus on gender, equity or human rights concerns (OECD DAC 2018). Other common issues identified across the criteria include:

- The importance of **positionality** and whose perspective is used in defining the evaluative questions and who conducts the evaluation. The views of the person who defines what is effective and how the performance of an intervention is measured will likely have a significant impact on findings. This is related to calls for the **decolonisation of evaluation**. Chilisa and Mertens (2021) find that evaluation is dominated by Western culture and approaches, reinforcing biased power relations (2021:242). Ofir (2017) applies this directly to the OECD DAC criteria, calling out insufficient recognition of the importance of culture and cultural differences (Ofir 2017).
- Others have suggested the need for more guidance to **improve standardisation** (Darcy and Dillon 2020), **while maintaining flexibility** in application (DEval 2018).
- Another key challenge is the **variable utility and application of the criteria**, which depends on the type of programme, the organisation and the intent of the evaluation.

A foundational question for future humanitarian guidance is **how closely it should align to the OECD DAC guidance** (and the adaptation the OECD made to the criteria in 2019).

## Methodology

The research, from which this brief is adapted, relied primarily on desk review and analysis of 155 documents including 43 guidance documents for humanitarian evaluation, 53 papers from academic and grey literature and 59 humanitarian evaluations. This was supplemented with engagement with an advisory group established by ALNAP with formal feedback processes. The full paper compares each criterion and cross-cutting criteria across sector-wide guidance and standards published by ALNAP, OECD DAC, IASC and the Core Humanitarian Standard; highlights key issues identified in the literature; and analyses organisational guidance and evaluations to provide a snapshot of the contemporary application of each criterion. It also identifies key questions for further exploration.

The methodology is limited in depth by the availability of literature specific to the research questions for each criterion, and the time required for targeted analysis. It does not reflect contemporary or unwritten views of evaluators; this will be captured in the next phase of ALNAP's consultation process.



# EFFECTIVENESS

## MOST-USED OECD DAC CRITERION

### Definitions

ALNAP Guide 2006	OECD DAC Criteria 2019
<b>Effectiveness:</b> Measures the extent to which an activity achieves its purpose, or whether this can be expected to happen on the basis of the outputs. Implicit within the criterion of effectiveness is timeliness.	<b>Effectiveness:</b> Is the intervention achieving its objectives? The extent to which the intervention achieved, or is expected to achieve, its objectives, and its results, including any differential results across groups.

### Key issues and questions arising

**Effectiveness** is the most applied of all the OECD DAC evaluation criteria. Effectiveness is generally defined in terms of achieving objectives. Challenges were identified in determining what constitutes an objective, and how they are best measured in humanitarian contexts. ALNAP (2006) defines 'objectives' as 'intermediate between outputs and outcomes' (p. 51). Darcy and Dillon (2020) argue that objectives must be defined in terms of a change that is external to the project or action.

Organisational evaluation guidance varies widely in the terminology used to explain the level of objective expected to be assessed, and includes: objectives, results, immediate results, purpose, outputs and outcomes.

- [Is more precise guidance needed on what constitutes an objective?](#)

A further consideration is whether the intervention's original objectives remain relevant in changing contexts and therefore whether their achievement is an indicator of effectiveness (with links to the exploration of adaptive management under cross-cutting themes later in this paper).

- [Should objectives be tested for relevance in the current context before they are used as an indicator of effectiveness \(considering adaptive management\)?](#)

Sector-wide guidance variously emphasises coordination, timeliness, quality, protection and vulnerable groups/equity/inclusion as key components of effectiveness. ALNAP (2006) includes coordination under the effectiveness criterion. WFP's guidance, echoing OECD DAC's definition of 'results', explicitly includes both intended and unintended, positive and negative results.

- [Should coordination, timeliness, quality, protection and vulnerable groups/equity/inclusion be considered elements of effectiveness? If not, how should they be considered in relation to the other evaluation criteria?](#)
- [Is it necessary to specify and explicitly measure unintended results, and to explore negative, as well as positive, results? What are the challenges to doing this effectively in practice and are there situations in which this is not feasible?](#)

In practice, evaluators are often challenged in their ability to find the evidence needed to determine whether objectives have been met, and whether change can be attributed to a single actor or even to combined humanitarian action (OECD 2007; Heider 2017; ALNAP 2018; Darcy and Dillon 2020).

- [How can guidance help address challenges in assessing attribution and measuring effectiveness?](#)

ALNAP (2006) recommends that evaluations should analyse whether and how primary stakeholders participated in the intervention's design and the formulation of objectives, and include the perspectives of primary stakeholders – as opposed to other humanitarian actors such as organisation staff – in determining whether interventions have met their objectives.

- [How important is the perspective of primary stakeholders in designing and evaluating effectiveness? If important, how can guidance enable this?](#)



# RELEVANCE / APPROPRIATENESS

## SECOND MOST-USED OECD DAC CRITERION

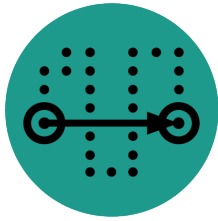
### Definitions

ALNAP Guide 2006	OECD DAC Criteria 2019
<b>Relevance/Appropriateness:</b> Relevance is concerned with assessing whether the project is in line with local needs and priorities (as well as donor policy). Appropriateness is the tailoring of humanitarian activities to local needs, increasing ownership, accountability and cost-effectiveness accordingly.	<b>Relevance:</b> Is the intervention doing the right things? The extent to which the intervention's objectives and design respond to beneficiaries', global, country and partner/institutions' needs, policies and priorities and continue to do so if circumstances change.

### Key issues and questions arising

**Relevance/appropriateness** is the second most-used OECD DAC criterion in humanitarian evaluations (Darcy and Dillon 2020). The literature highlights two main issues related to its application:

1. Power differentials in humanitarian aid means the evaluator's interpretation of what is relevant and appropriate may be very different to what is considered relevant and appropriate by the affected population. Contemporary guidance does not specify who should define relevance and appropriateness in evaluations.
  - How might the positionality of the evaluator and author of the evaluation terms of reference and the composition of the evaluation team impact the evaluation questions, methodology, findings and recommendations?
  - Should guidance emphasise whose perspective should be prioritised when defining relevance/appropriateness or how differences in views can be reconciled? For example, is it more important to emphasise what is relevant to people affected by crisis, than what is relevant to donors and global policy objectives? How can principles related to Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) help inform evaluative perspectives?
  - Should guidance put a greater emphasis on positionality and the importance of careful reflection on whose views and which perspectives will inform the evaluative questions in relation to relevance? Should guidance address this directly or specify who should define relevance and appropriateness in evaluations?
2. Relevance/appropriateness is not systematically applied across evaluations, meaning two evaluations of the same programme could potentially come to different conclusions about its relevance and appropriateness. Of the guidance documents analysed, none used the exact definition of relevance and appropriateness provided in the OECD DAC criteria guidance, or ALNAP's 2006 guide.
  - How important is it for relevance and appropriateness to be more systematically applied and to be comparable across evaluations?



# EFFICIENCY

## THIRD MOST-USED OECD DAC CRITERION

### Definitions

ALNAP Guide 2006	OECD DAC Criteria 2019
<p><b>Efficiency:</b> Efficiency measures the outputs – qualitative and quantitative – achieved as a result of inputs. This generally requires comparing alternative approaches to achieving an output, to see whether the most efficient approach has been used.</p>	<p><b>Efficiency:</b> How well are resources being used? The extent to which the intervention delivers, or is likely to deliver, results in an economic and timely way.</p>

### Key issues and questions arising

**Efficiency** is the third most-applied OECD DAC criterion. Cost-efficiency and timeliness are common components of the criterion. Operational efficiencies, such as consortia and partnerships, were often also included in the evaluations reviewed.

The OECD DAC views this criterion as an opportunity to check whether an intervention's resources can be justified by its results. It takes a broad view of resources, including human, environment, financial and time resources, and includes the complete intervention results chain, from outputs to impact.

The CHS notes that a balance needs to be struck between economy, effectiveness and efficiency, as a programme that is economical isn't always value for money – for example, a programme that is understaffed or under-resourced (CHS 2018). Donors, such as the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), have long sought to deliver value for money on behalf of taxpayers. The FCDO has used a '5E' framework to track value for money – economy, efficiency, effectiveness, equity and overall cost-effectiveness (UK Aid Direct 2019).

While important for decision-making, learning and accountability, the literature indicates that evaluation of efficiency often suffers as a result of weak data sources and variable methodologies, and fails to account for social and environmental costs.

- Should the 2006 ALNAP definition of efficiency be broadened, similar to that of the 2019 OECD DAC definition? Or potentially more aligned to value-for-money approaches?
- Are cost-efficiency, timeliness and operational efficiencies the three most important components of efficiency? Should effectiveness and equity also be considered, in line with approaches to value for money (such as the FCDO's '5E' framework)?
- How can guidance support evaluators when they have limited resources for evaluation and limited technical skill sets for assessing efficiency?





# IMPACT

## FOURTH MOST-USED OECD DAC CRITERION

### Definitions

ALNAP Guide 2006	OECD DAC Criteria 2019
<p><b>Impact:</b> Impact looks at the wider effects of the project – social, economic, technical, environmental – on individuals, gender- and age-groups, communities and institutions. Impacts can be intended and unintended, positive and negative, or macro (sector) and micro (household).</p>	<p><b>Impact:</b> The extent to which the intervention has generated or is expected to generate significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, higher-level effects.</p>

### Key issues and questions arising

**Impact** is the fourth most-applied OECD DAC criterion, considered in almost 50% of evaluations (Darcy and Dillon 2020). ALNAP (2006) explains the differences and similarities between impact and effectiveness: while effectiveness considers whether intermediate objectives have been achieved, impact examines the longer-term consequences of achieving or not achieving those objectives. Its longer-term focus links it with the application of the connectedness criterion in evaluating lasting benefits. The 2019 OECD DAC criteria definition focuses on higher-level effects (such as changes in norms or systems), as compared to ALNAP's wider effects (2006) or longer-term outcomes (2018).

The 2021 OECD DAC guidance notes the importance of considering differential impact across groups of people (such as groups of people disaggregated by gender, age, ability or vulnerability), particularly any significant, unintended negative distributional effects. Proudlock and Ramalingam (2009) further emphasised the importance of understanding impact from different perspectives, finding that impact assessment 'inevitably involves value judgments about which kinds of changes are significant, and for whom'.

Some organisations, including the WFP, UNHCR, the World Bank, USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance and the United Kingdom's FCDO have invested in impact evaluations (focused solely on impact) using specific methodologies. Other organisations, including UNFPA (2019) and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (in its IAHE process guidelines 2018) have excluded impact from their evaluation criteria entirely.

- Is it more appropriate to focus on wider effects, longer-term outcomes, or higher-level effects when evaluating the impact of humanitarian action? Does it vary by organisation and programme?
- Is there enough focus on unintended impact in humanitarian evaluations?
- How can guidance address the challenges of evaluating impact in short time-horizons and of establishing cause and effect and attribution in humanitarian settings?
- Should guidance include views on the types of situations and settings in which evaluating impact is more or less appropriate?



# COVERAGE

## FIFTH MOST-USED OECD DAC CRITERION

### Definitions

ALNAP Guide 2006	OECD DAC Criteria 2019
Coverage: The need to reach major population groups facing life-threatening suffering wherever they are.	N/A

### Key issues and questions arising

**Coverage** is an additional criterion in ALNAP's 2006 guide; it is not an OECD DAC evaluation criterion. It is one of the least-used criteria (followed by coherence, sustainability and connectedness), occurring in approximately 40% of humanitarian evaluations (Darcy and Dillon 2020).

Coverage is highly relevant to issues identified in the performance of humanitarian action, and a priority criterion for some. It is central to the commitment to 'Leave No One Behind'.

There is variance in terms of how explicitly evaluations consider geographic coverage, socioeconomic coverage and proportionality to need. A more recent definition of coverage (UNICEF 2019) drew on ALNAP and the WFP to define coverage as the extent to which major population groups facing life-threatening suffering are being (or were) reached by humanitarian action, including the provision of impartial assistance and protection proportionate to need. In practice, geographic and socioeconomic coverage is considered most often; proportionality is less common. Some guidelines specify the population groups important to consider, along with the need to evaluate for inclusion bias as well as the more obvious exclusion bias.

- [Should the definition of coverage include geographic and socioeconomic coverage and proportionality to need? Should they receive an equal level of focus?](#)

In 2019, UNICEF conducted an evaluation focused on coverage and quality. It found challenges in reliably identifying and distinguishing between people (a) affected by crisis; (b) in need; (c) targeted for planned interventions and (d) ultimately reached. It also identified challenges in understanding how these population and targeting figures are calculated.

- [Are these categories helpful to include in evaluations? Is it important for evaluations to review the source of calculations for targeting assistance?](#)

UNICEF's evaluation also highlighted trade-offs between equity, quality and coverage. The evaluation found that coverage is consistently prioritised over equity and quality, particularly at the onset of a crisis, with no common understanding of when to transition from prioritising coverage to improving quality.

- [Should guidance support evaluators to assess coverage in the context of equity and in relation to quality? If so, how?](#)



# COHERENCE

## SIXTH MOST-USED OECD DAC CRITERION

### Definitions

ALNAP Guide 2006	OECD DAC Criteria 2019
<b>Coherence:</b> The need to assess security, developmental, trade and military policies as well as humanitarian policies, to ensure that there is consistency and, in particular, that all policies take into account humanitarian and human rights considerations.	<b>Coherence:</b> The compatibility of the intervention with other interventions in a country, sector or institution.

### Key issues and questions arising

**Coherence** is one of the least-applied criteria in humanitarian evaluations and is sometimes assessed as part of other criteria (Darcy and Dillon 2020, Drew 2021, ALNAP 2006 and ALNAP 2018). While it has long been a criterion for evaluating humanitarian action, it has only recently been added to the OECD DAC evaluation criteria for development.

In the review, coherence as a criterion was represented mainly in UN, IFRC or donor-led evaluations, supporting literature findings on the complexity and challenge of assessing coherence for a single organisation at a project level.

- **What reasons might account for why coherence is among the criteria least applied and least included in guidance?**
- **When is it most useful or necessary? Are there circumstances or types of evaluations where coherence is less applicable?**

The literature and other guidance focus on the sub-division of coherence into internal coherence within organisations' own policies and standards, and external coherence with other actors and standards, with varying levels of focus on coherence with humanitarian principles.

- **Do these elements of coherence resonate? Are they equally important?**
- **Could the definition be more precise or should it remain broad?**

Humanitarian principles have become more prominent in ALNAP's guidance and in the application of the coherence criterion. As with coherence more broadly, humanitarian principles are both debated and challenging to implement (see, for example, Slim 2020 and Buchanan-Smith in relation to the 2022 Ukraine conflict). A United Nations Evaluation Group Working Paper (2016) advocated for humanitarian principles to be embedded systematically as core elements of the evaluation of humanitarian action.

- **How important is it that humanitarian principles are evaluated as part of the coherence criterion? Should guidance recommend it?**



# CONNECTEDNESS AND SUSTAINABILITY

## LEAST-USED OECD DAC CRITERIA

### Definitions

ALNAP Guide 2006	OECD DAC Criteria 2019
<p><b>Connectedness:</b> Refers to the need to ensure that activities of a short-term emergency nature are carried out in a context that takes longer-term and interconnected problems into account.</p>	<p><b>Sustainability:</b> Will the benefits last? The extent to which the net benefits of the intervention continue or are likely to continue.</p>

### Key issues and questions arising

**Connectedness** is the least-used criterion in evaluating humanitarian action. A 2020 review by ALNAP found that sustainability has been applied slightly more often than connectedness in humanitarian evaluations (Darcy and Dillon 2020).

The application of connectedness and sustainability as a criterion is complicated by the respective terms used, and differences in definition. The more common understanding reflects either the ALNAP and OECD DAC definitions given above, or that provided by ALNAP in the 2018 SOHS: the degree to which the international humanitarian system articulates with development, resilience, risk reduction and peacebuilding (p. 35).

- Given that sustainability has been applied more often than connectedness in humanitarian evaluations, should the term 'sustainability' be adopted for this criterion, along with the updated OECD DAC definition?
- What elements of connectedness are most useful to evaluating humanitarian action or essential to keep or emphasise further: (a) lasting benefits; (b) consideration of longer-term and interconnected problems; (c) links with development, including recovery, resilience, risk reduction and peacebuilding; (d) contribution to stakeholder ownership, local capacities and local partnerships.

Some organisations include local capacities and external partnerships as foundational to connectedness/sustainability, while others (ALNAP 2018, and evaluations by the WFP and the Disasters Emergency Committee) found these elements important enough to be considered under a separate criterion of 'complementarity'.

- Should local capacities and partnerships be highlighted as part of the connectedness criterion? Are they sufficiently critical to effective humanitarian action that they should be elevated to an additional or cross-cutting criterion, such as complementarity?

Connectedness and sustainability are much debated. It is 'unusual among the OECD DAC performance criteria in that there is disagreement as to whether connectedness should be used as a measure of humanitarian performance at all' (ALNAP 2018, p. 239). This disagreement is anchored in the long history and continued debate regarding the relationship between humanitarian action and development (ALNAP 2018).



# ADDITIONAL CRITERIA AND CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

## Cross-cutting themes and additional considerations

ALNAP Guide 2006	OECD DAC Criteria 2019
<p><b>Cross-cutting themes:</b> Local context, human resources, protection, participation of primary stakeholders, coping strategies and resilience, gender equality, HIV/AIDS and the environment.</p>	<p><b>Additional considerations:</b> Gender, equity, inclusion, the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (OECD DAC 2021).</p>
<p>Additional criteria in ALNAP's State of the Humanitarian System Reports (2018, 2020): Sufficiency, complementarity, accountability and participation.</p>	

## Key issues and questions arising

The research identified at least 30 additional and cross-cutting themes in a sample of 40 humanitarian evaluations. ALNAP itself listed eight cross-cutting themes in its 2006 guide and three additional criteria in its 2018 and 2022 State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) reports. OECD DAC (2021) does not explicitly include cross-cutting themes. It does, however, explain how to incorporate inclusion and equity across each criterion and encourages the application of a gender lens to evaluations. It also explains how to consider the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals in evaluations.

There are some apparent trends that future guidance may wish to consider incorporating as additional criteria or cross-cutting themes: ways of working with national and local actors (including coordination); ways of working with communities (such as accountability to affected populations); and diversity, equity and inclusion. Protection, as the third most-applied cross-cutting theme, will also need to be addressed, given its centrality and the challenges in evaluating it (ALNAP 2018a). Adaptive management, as an emerging criterion, could also be explored.

- [Should guidance specify cross-cutting themes, similar to the approach taken by ALNAP in 2006, or explain how to incorporate selected themes \(not explicitly labelled as 'cross-cutting'\), similar to the approach taken by OECD DAC \(2021\)?](#)

Future guidance will need to be explicit about how to best address coordination. There is merit in reflecting current guidance and practice, which both emphasises coordination as a critical component of effectiveness, and alternately includes it as an additional criterion. A preference for fewer, rather than more, criteria may be the determining factor.

- [Should coordination be included as an additional criterion, or incorporated under other criteria?](#)

Coordination is not sufficient on its own to reflect the trends towards working in ways that support and strengthen local and national actors, accountability and partnership. This could be explored through ways of working with local and national actors, and with communities.

**Gender, diversity and inclusion, equity and equality** was the most applied cross-cutting theme or consideration. Of the evaluations analysed, 80% considered gender, equity or inclusion in their approach. While inclusion was most frequently cited, it often incorporated gender and/or equity, as well as disability status and age. Where gender, equity or inclusion were considered under individual OECD DAC evaluation criteria, they were most commonly considered under effectiveness (seven times) and relevance (five times).

Terminology and definitions vary widely. Guidance and evaluations refer to gender, diversity, inclusion, equity, equality, leaving no one behind, and more. In recent research, the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) (Lough et al. 2022) found that the system is lacking in its ability to deliver inclusive humanitarian action. One issue, highlighted by both HPG and ALNAP (Lough et al. 2022 and ALNAP 2020) is the tendency to address 'vulnerable' groups individually and programmatically, missing systemic issues and important sections of society. HPG cites, among other causes for poor performance on inclusion, a lack of high-level commitment from leadership, and a lack of tools to assess, track and evaluate progress on inclusion (Lough et al. 2022).

Updated humanitarian guidance could choose to address this poor performance on inclusion by incorporating gender, equity and/or inclusion as a cross-cutting theme.

**Accountability to affected populations, participation and communication with communities** are considered together as closely related concepts and collectively represent the second most-applied consideration in the evaluations analysed. Together, they were applied as cross-cutting themes 19 times in the 40 evaluations analysed, with accountability to affected populations being the most common.

An independent review of the Grand Bargain (Metcalf-Hough et al. 2022, p.15) found that, despite efforts to elevate and improve participation (also referred to as 'accountability to affected populations'), there has not yet been 'any substantive impact'. ALNAP justified the inclusion of accountability to affected populations as a separate criterion by arguing that 'it is not possible to say the system has performed satisfactorily unless aid is provided in a way that is accountable to those who receive it and allows them some measure of influence in decisions over the aid they receive' (2018, p. 34).

Future guidance could choose to strengthen the current trend towards evaluating accountability to affected populations, and consider including it as a cross-cutting theme.

**Protection** was the third most-common cross-cutting theme in evaluations, assessed in 30% of evaluations reviewed. Future guidance will need to consider how to best approach protection, particularly given the IASC statement that 'all humanitarian actors have a responsibility to place protection at the centre of humanitarian action' (2013). It is substantively explored in ALNAP's 2018 Guide: Evaluation of Protection in Humanitarian Action. ALNAP (2018a) highlights the importance of evaluating protection, while acknowledging the complexity of doing so. Usefully for future guidance, it provides protection considerations for each of the OECD DAC criteria for humanitarian action to assist when designing questions for protection evaluations.

**Adaptive management** has attracted attention more recently. The global scale of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its dramatic impact on ways of operating, lent an urgency to learning, adaptive management and innovation (Buchanan-Smith and Morrison-Métois 2021). Many Real-Time Learning exercises in the early response to the pandemic focused on adaptive management, as have some prominent humanitarian evaluations. It has also been a priority for some donors. Evaluating adaptive management challenges organisations to look at the way in

which their organisational processes support or hinder the ability to learn, adapt and improve delivery. Applying an adaptive management lens may also assist evaluators to test whether the objectives being assessed are the most relevant to the changing context over time.

Given that the approach to adaptive management is still emerging, it would seem most appropriate that future guidance follow the OECD DAC's approach to incorporating adaptation under the relevance criterion. Alternative approaches could be considered through consultation.

**Ways of working with local and national actors** is perhaps less defined. Following years of attempts to reform the humanitarian sector, the more recent discussion about decolonising aid is pushing the sector to consider ways of working that are even more transformative. The criteria of localisation, complementarity and partnership added by IAHE (2018) and in the SOHS (ALNAP 2018) could be reviewed to find a concept or single criterion that best captures the intent of the sector. Any additional criteria or cross-cutting theme on this topic would benefit from substantive consultation.

- If cross-cutting themes are specified, should they be (a) gender, equity and inclusion; (b) accountability to affected populations or (c) protection? If not, should these be addressed as additional criteria, or integrated across existing criteria?
- Is it important to more explicitly incorporate ways of working with local and national actors (such as localisation or complementarity) into guidance for evaluating humanitarian action? If so, should this be included as a cross-cutting theme, as an additional criterion, or integrated across existing criteria?
- Is there an ideal number of cross-cutting themes or additional criteria? Should they be limited?

# CONCLUSION

The OECD DAC criteria have proven highly popular in the evaluation of humanitarian action. Their use has contributed to the sector's ability to improve the quality of evaluation and to compare findings across evaluations. But there are also key challenges and issues faced by evaluators and users of humanitarian evaluations that have arisen since ALNAP published its guidance for applying the criteria to humanitarian action in 2006.

This brief summarises the different approaches taken to applying the OECD DAC criteria to evaluations of humanitarian action, drawing on a desk review of literature, guidelines and evaluations. It is intended to inform ALNAP's forthcoming consultations to understand contemporary perspectives on the criteria. It is expected that the issues identified in this paper are but the beginning. There is lively debate in the evaluation community regarding many aspects of the criteria.

The endurance of the evaluation criteria, their extensive application and the utility of having a common basis or framework for evaluating and understanding performance in the humanitarian sector, are all factors in favour of ensuring there is adequate guidance for practitioners on using the OECD DAC criteria in humanitarian settings. The contemporary critiques, changes in concepts, topical issues and language over time, and the varied application of the criteria in practice, suggest that updated and additional guidance would be helpful. The OECD DAC's own update to the criteria (2019) and guidance (2021) provide an anchor for ALNAP to update its guidance for humanitarian evaluators and a foundation upon which to build. The fundamental question is: Are the current criteria fit for purpose? If not, what set of criteria and approach to applying them do we need to be able to better assess the performance of humanitarian action? How can ALNAP assist in providing useful guidance for the broader sector?

## **Your views matter!**

This paper is meant to inform further exchanges and discussions in the humanitarian evaluation community, as ALNAP seeks to update its existing guidance.

To share your views, visit our [website](#) to find more information about participating in a survey of evaluation practitioners and upcoming consultation events.

## **Want to get in touch?**

You can contact ALNAP's Senior Research Fellow, Susanna Morrison-Métois at: [evalcriteria@alnap.com](mailto:evalcriteria@alnap.com)



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