

Relevance and Appropriateness in Humanitarian Action

Neil Dillon

Research Fellow



What's special about evaluating humanitarian action?



A unique subject matter:

- Humanitarianism as saving lives
- Humanitarian principles:
 - Humanity
 - Neutrality
 - Impartiality
 - Independence

In challenging contexts:

- Constrained access
- Polarised perspectives
- High staff turnover
- Data unavailability
- Rapid responses
- Rapid changes

OECD DAC Criteria in EHA contexts

“Standard” OECD DAC Criteria

- Relevance
- Effectiveness
- Efficiency
- Impact
- Sustainability

OECD (2000)



Humanitarian OECD DAC Criteria

- Relevance/Appropriateness
- Effectiveness
- Efficiency
- Impact
- Coherence
- Connectedness
- Coverage

Beck (2006)



Defining Relevance and Appropriateness in Humanitarian Action



‘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.’

Beck (2006)

- ❑ **Example:** an intervention to improve nutritional status may be
 - relevant (because nutrition is a priority need) but
 - inappropriate (because it used cash where local markets could not meet demand or in-kind transfers where they could)



Critical points to consider:

- ❑ Do interventions meet priority needs of affected populations?
 - System-wide needs assessments
 - Programme specific needs assessments
 - Voices of affected people

- ❑ Do they meet the needs of vulnerable groups?
 - Specific needs and circumstances of certain groups:
 - Women
 - Elderly
 - Disabled people
 - LGBT people



Critical points to consider:

- ❑ Do interventions meet evolving needs?
 - The shift from emergency to chronic needs
 - Collection and use of monitoring data on evolving needs
 - Impact of short funding cycles on long-term planning
 - Responding to new and unexpected needs

- ❑ Are they appropriate to crisis contexts?
 - Choice of transfer modality and means
 - Provision of conflict-sensitive aid and protection
 - Tailoring for cultures and country income levels
 - Tailoring for urban response



Evaluation challenges:

❑ Meeting priority needs:

- Whose priorities?
- Is humanitarian aid just about saving lives?
- When relevance ('were the "right" or the "wrong" needs covered?') slips into effectiveness ('were they successful in providing basic assistance?')

❑ Meeting needs of vulnerable groups:

- Need for disaggregated monitoring data
- Matching HQ policy and field realities
- Importance of collecting representative samples from all groups



Evaluation challenges:

❑ Meeting evolving needs

- Understanding the boundaries of humanitarian action
- Dealing with the messy interrelations between acute and chronic needs
- Evaluating against an outdated theory of change
- Understanding why changes were made – or were not

❑ Appropriateness to crisis contexts

- Limited normative frameworks for this (SPHERE, Protection Standards, urban)
- Importance of gathering perspectives of affected populations
- Ethical questions about changing the definition of need according to population groups



Where do things stand?

Review of 120 evaluations covering 2015-2018 period shows:

- ❑ Do interventions meet priority needs of affected populations?
 - Overall, evaluations paint a positive picture about relevance, but evidential rigour varies, with many evaluations relying on triangulation of expert opinions.
 - Many treat relevance as linked to provision of priority needs, sometimes defined as static “basic needs” package.
 - Only limited analysis of relation between intervention scope and Humanitarian Response Plans.
 - Only 19 of 120 evaluations reviewed asked affected people their view. Of these 15 said priority needs were met.



Where do things stand?

Review of 120 evaluations covering 2015-2018 period shows:

Do they meet needs of vulnerable groups?

- Overall findings suggest that humanitarian actors are not particularly successful at meeting specific needs of vulnerable groups
- Picture remains one of providing a “standard package” without conducting vulnerability assessments
- Situation of women and girls has received more HQ attention than the past, but impact of this in the field is still hard to see
- Monitoring data is still not always disaggregated by gender, age or other factors



Where do things stand?

Review of 120 evaluations covering 2015-2018 period shows:

Do interventions meet evolving needs?

- System seems to be better at providing emergency assistance than addressing chronic needs
- Constraints include weaknesses in monitoring evolving needs and short-term funding structures

Are they appropriate to crisis contexts?

- Clear signs of adapting to different needs, e.g. protection programming in conflicts or refugee contexts; but scant examples of adapting tools and approaches to e.g. urban settings
- Ebola stands out as an example of the humanitarian system struggling to meet priority needs in a “new type” of emergency: one where the standard multi-sector response was not a good fit



Some final considerations: factors affecting relevance

ALNAP's review suggests three factors have critical roles in determining relevance

❑ Needs assessments:

- Significant advances over last 3yrs (ACAPS, HNOs, WHS and Grand Bargain)
- But quality and continuity of assessments is sometimes weak

❑ Strategy:

- Without clear priorities for a response, agencies revert to “standard” package, potentially reducing relevance and appropriateness

❑ Cash:

- Has the potential to increase relevance by passing decision to recipient, but not always preferred by affected populations