

# Updating ALNAP's guidance:

## Evaluating humanitarian action using the OECD DAC criteria

### Background

The OECD DAC evaluation criteria, first published in 1991, provide a normative framework for evaluation and were designed to help promote collaboration in evaluation practice, by offering a common approach to help frame evaluation questions. They have formed the backbone of evaluation design, thinking and conceptualisation. While other organisations and networks have made additions and modifications to the original five OECD DAC criteria, 30 years later they remain the most cited and widely applied set of evaluation frames through which evaluation theory and practice is taught, managed and applied.

In 2006, ALNAP published a guidance document on using the OECD DAC evaluation criteria in humanitarian settings, [Evaluating humanitarian action using the OECD DAC criteria](#). The guidance was designed to help evaluation professionals better understand and use the OECD DAC criteria in humanitarian settings. It also recognised that additional criteria (connectedness, coherence and coverage) were needed in these settings. Moreover, the guidance explicitly acknowledged that the DAC criteria were often used mechanistically, and that humanitarian actors need a specific guidance document on good practice in applying these criteria in the field. The guidance focused on offering practical examples of how humanitarian practitioners have used the criteria, using real-world cases of how they have been applied. The guidance, which humanitarian evaluators 'road tested' or piloted before publication, helped consolidate ALNAP's role in defining and promoting high-quality evaluation practice and learning in the humanitarian sector and providing evaluation reference material designed for the sector. It has remained popular since publication and continues to be frequently downloaded.

### Why ALNAP wants to update the existing guidance

In 2017, the OECD DAC launched a two-year consultation to review and revise the existing OECD DAC evaluation criteria. As part of this process, it was recognised that the existing criteria were often applied in a mechanistic manner, and that the revision would need to address the issues concerning how to use the criteria. Throughout the consultation process, participants often expressed difficulty in applying the criteria in practice, rather than just needing clarification on the definitions.

The consultation process also identified the key strengths of the criteria, including their:

- Widespread acceptance and use within and beyond the evaluation profession
- Standardisation and consistency
- Simplicity and clarity



- Neutrality
- Universality
- Utility
- Results focus
- Adaptability and flexibility
- Conciseness and feasibility<sup>1</sup>

The OECD published a [revision of the criteria in 2019 along with two principles](#) for applying them, and a Guidance on the use of the criteria will be published in 2021.

ALNAP has a key role to play in helping provide guidance on the use of the criteria in contexts specific to humanitarian action. The continuing popularity of ALNAP's 2006 publication shows that there is still a demand for clear guidance and suggests that an updated version would similarly be useful. The forthcoming OECD DAC guidance on the application of the criteria recognises that it will need to be complemented with specific guidance for humanitarian settings.

In updating the original publication, ALNAP will also be able to further explore evaluation issues specific to humanitarian action, including common constraints and challenges experienced in applying the criteria in humanitarian settings over the past 15 years. ALNAP will also ensure that recent examples from real-world humanitarian evaluations, notes on good practices and learning since the 2006 publication are included in the update. Wider policy considerations and cross-cutting issues (such as gender, human rights, disability, etc) may also be considered if they complement the OECD DAC criteria.

The updated guidance will also reflect changes in evaluation practice, such as the move away from linear log frames, the greater emphasis on adaptive management, wider use of theories of change, and complexity-aware evaluation approaches, among others. Similarly, common issues such as the limited availability of data, access constraints and shorter time horizons in humanitarian settings present obstacles to the quality of evaluation and may also limit its scope and methods. An update will also need to address how to apply the criteria in evaluating humanitarian partnerships, nested interventions, wider policy-level issues, and conducting joint and system-wide evaluations. The relationship between the criteria, the assessment of individual humanitarian interventions and broader humanitarian policy commitments could also be explored in more depth.<sup>2</sup>

For instance, the humanitarian policy commitments reflected in the Grand Bargain and the New Way of Working as well as the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 with an emphasis on the interconnectedness, trade-offs and synergies among the 17 goals and their application in humanitarian action, may also need to be addressed. Similarly, the integration of climate and environmental concerns in humanitarian action merit further reflection. Finally, a greater focus on inclusion and equity in the context of the 2030 Agenda of Leaving No One Behind, with the disaggregation of data and greater attention to coverage and locally led humanitarian action, should be further explored.

The final guidance will aim to remain concise and user-friendly, requiring a clear prioritisation of key issues to cover and a strong process for ensuring that decisions are made on what topics to include and exclude. ALNAP will also explore various formats and options to create an interactive guide (such as an e-guide or app) and accompanying video or other communication options.

<sup>1</sup> See [PowerPoint Presentation \(worldbankgroup.org\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> Such as The World Humanitarian Summit, Principles for Good Humanitarian Donorship, The Global Compacts on Refugees and Migration, The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, IASC Civil-Military Guidelines and Reference for Complex Emergencies, etc.

With the revision of the OECD definitions, there will also be a need for ALNAP to harmonise the criteria and definitions used in existing and future M&E publications. Numerous ALNAP publications contain references to the OECD DAC criteria and therefore may also need to be updated in due course (SOHS report, EHA guide, etc).

## Overall aims, Proposed Process & Timeline for revision

### Key objectives and aims

ALNAP aims to revise and update the existing publication by early 2022. The main focus of the update will be on ensuring that a revised guidance document (and any supporting products) maintain the best features from the original publication, including:

- Concise, non-technical definitions and language designed to reach a broad audience
- A short format and user-friendly design
- Specific examples of how to apply the criteria in field settings
- A focus on providing a reference document for humanitarian practitioners to complement ALNAP's existing M&E Guidance

Given that the intention is primarily to focus on an update to the existing guidance, a relatively short turnaround time is envisaged. The proposed process will be designed to achieve the following objectives:

- Clarify and explore key issues and challenges arising from the existing definitions and understanding of the criteria
- Elucidate and explore key challenges in the application of the criteria in humanitarian settings
- Build upon the existing publication and the recent OECD DAC Guidance document on the use of the criteria
- Ensure the participation and buy-in of ALNAP members and key institutions in the humanitarian evaluation community
- Allow a forum for ALNAP Members to contribute to the revision, while keeping the process manageable and the timeframe relatively short
- Ensure that proposed revisions are technically sound and based on the experiences of evaluation practitioners in using the criteria in a variety of humanitarian settings
- Maintain a key focus on the challenges and issues specific to humanitarian practitioners

A timely and relatively short process is envisaged for the review and update of the existing guidance.

### Initial proposed process and timeframe

- **February–March 2021:** Formation of an advisory group to assist the ALNAP Secretariat
- **March–April 2021:** Scope, key activities and timeline further refined by advisory group and;
- **March–April 2021:** Draft TOR for recruitment of consultant(s)
- **April–May 2021:** Recruitment of consultant(s) to assist the ALNAP Secretariat

- **May–July 2021:** Consultation process with members
- **July–September 2021:** Drafting of revised guidance
- **October–November 2021:** Revision of draft guidance and inclusion of case studies/examples
- **November–December 2021:** Finalisation of the initial guidance and editing
- **December 2021–January 2022:** Publication of draft guidance for piloting/field testing
- **January–June 2022:** Pilot of draft guidance for an initial six-month period
- **July–December 2022:** Revisions made to guidance and publication of final version

The timeline and proposed process will be further refined in discussion with the advisory group in Q1 2021.

## Proposed role of the Advisory Group

### Key role of advisory group

Given the popularity of the existing guidance, there is likely to be great interest in contributing to the update. The key role of the advisory group will be to assist the ALNAP Secretariat to further refine the process, conduct meaningful consultations with members and provide expert advice throughout the wider member consultation phase, drafting and revision process. The Advisory Group will be chaired by someone with deep experience in humanitarian evaluation.

As a first step, the advisory group will help ALNAP further refine the exact scope, process, and approach to be taken. The advisory group will also help ensure that ALNAP Members are engaged throughout the process and given a clear voice in defining the key issues and how to address them. The ALNAP Secretariat will take the lead in managing and conducting the revision, with guidance from the advisory group.

For more information on the composition, key tasks, and selection process for the advisory group, please see the Terms of Reference.

## How to get involved

**In the advisory group:** Please review the TOR for the advisory group and write to [Susanna Morrison-Metois](#) to express interest before 15 March. Staff from Member organisations are invited to nominate their colleagues and other humanitarian evaluation experts.

**To participate in the discussions:** Join [ALNAP's online community of practice \(CoP\)](#). We will be regularly posting discussion topics related to the evaluation criteria in the CoP over the coming year. We also invite Members interested in writing a blog for the ALNAP website about the DAC evaluation criteria and their application in humanitarian action to contact us.

### CONTACT

ALNAP Senior Research Fellow  
Susanna Morrison-Metois  
E-mail: [s.morrison-metois@alnap.org](mailto:s.morrison-metois@alnap.org)

