

UNEG  
Guidance  
Document



**UNEG**  
United Nations Evaluation Group

# **UNEG Guidance on the Integration of Humanitarian Principles in the Evaluation of Humanitarian Action**

This publication was prepared by Margie Buchanan-Smith on behalf of the UNEG Humanitarian Evaluation Interest Group and benefited from the contributions of several UN humanitarian evaluation specialists. It is based and expands on an earlier version of this guidance that was drafted in 2017 by Margie Buchanan-Smith and Tony Beck, with Donna Podems. The analysis and recommendations of this document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or the United Nations Member States.

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## Foreword

The four humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence are the foundational normative framework for humanitarian action. Enshrined in the UN Charter and two General Assembly resolutions, they distinguish humanitarian action from other activities for UN agencies. They also are globally recognized and underscored by the Code of Conduct for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Red Crescent Movement and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief and the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability.

Yet, historically, evaluations of humanitarian action have tended to overlook the humanitarian principles. The UNEG publication “[Reflecting Humanitarian Principles in Evaluation](#)” (2016) analyzed how and to what extent the humanitarian principles were evaluated. It found that only four per cent of the evaluations included in the study sample could be considered examples of good practice. In recent years, there has been a modest but growing attempt from the humanitarian evaluation community to address this; some agencies, especially within the UN, have incorporated the humanitarian principles into their respective evaluations, as also attested by the ongoing Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations (IAHE). This Guidance draws deeply on this experience as well as the expertise of evaluation practitioners and managers. Yet, there remains a critical gap in evaluative evidence on this important topic.

This Guidance breaks new ground by providing direction and assistance to evaluation managers and evaluation teams on how to integrate the humanitarian principles into their work in a meaningful and thoughtful way that is mindful of potential risks. By encouraging our humanitarian evaluation community to address the humanitarian principles more systematically, it is my hope that this guidance will ensure our evaluations better hold the humanitarian system account and better promote learning about this complex topic.



Isabelle Mercier  
UNEG Chair

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## Acronyms

ACF	Action Against Hunger ( <i>Action contre la faim</i> )
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard
DFA	De facto authorities
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
HCT	Humanitarian Country Team
HDP	Humanitarian-Development-Peace
HP	Humanitarian principles
IAHE	Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IHL	International humanitarian law
KIIs	Key informant interviews
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NGOs	Non-governmental organizations
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OECD/DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee
SCHR	Standing Committee on Humanitarian Response
TOR	Terms of reference
UN	United Nations
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WFP	World Food Programme

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Why this guide

This guide has been written to provide practical guidance and tools to evaluators and evaluation managers, to integrate humanitarian principles (HPs) into standard evaluations of humanitarian action, and thus to strengthen the attention paid to HPs in evaluations of international humanitarian action, particularly in situations of armed conflict.

The track record of incorporating HPs within evaluations of humanitarian action within the United Nations (UN) system – and indeed within the wider humanitarian system – has been poor. Although some of the principles may be implicit in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC) evaluation criteria – for example evaluating against the “coverage” criterion usually touches upon the humanitarian principle of impartiality – the HPs are rarely explicit points of reference in an evaluation. Constraints to evaluating against HPs include:

- Limited common understanding of the HPs across the UN system;
- Sensitivity of agencies concerning potential evaluation findings;
- Lack of adequate expertise amongst evaluation managers and evaluators in evaluating adherence to HPs;
- Lack of a common framework for assessing adherence to HPs; and
- The technical focus of many single agency evaluations, which generally evaluate objectives in planning documents/logframes which do not tend to reference HPs.<sup>1</sup>

There is a small but growing body of experience of evaluating against HPs, from both single agency and multi-agency (especially Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluations [IAHEs]), that offers valuable learning. This guide draws on that experience, mainly from within the UN but also beyond, and from a number of research studies of the extent to which HPs have been operationalized in different humanitarian crises.<sup>2</sup> Apart from drawing on the final evaluation/research reports, over 20 key informant interviews (KIIs) were carried out with evaluators and researchers with experience of investigating agency adherence to HPs. Since evaluating against HPs is still in its infancy, this guide breaks new ground on a complex and challenging subject to encourage more evaluations of humanitarian action to use this point of reference.

For this reason, this guidance will be piloted in upcoming evaluations of humanitarian action by member agencies of the UNEG Humanitarian Evaluation Working Group, where possible. A concerted effort

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<sup>1</sup> As identified by the review commissioned by the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) in 2016, of how the four core HPs have been evaluated. Few evaluations referred to HPs, and where they did, the discussion was often general and lacking analysis (UNEG, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> The guide is also directed by the UNEG guidance on conducting evaluations of normative work (UNEG, 2013) and on integrating human rights and gender equality into evaluations (UNEG 2014; 2011). In particular, these documents provide an overarching framework and specific guidance on overcoming challenges and appropriate methodologies for evaluating adherence to the HPs, and are drawn on throughout this guide. This guide also draws and builds on ALNAP's *Evaluation of Humanitarian Action Guide*, published in 2016.



will be made by the group to follow-up on the experiences of the evaluation managers and evaluation team leaders who have used this guidance. Feedback will be sought about the overall utility of the guidance, areas of strengths and future enhancements.

## 1.2 Why integrate humanitarian principles into the evaluation of humanitarian action

### **Key reference 1: Evaluation of Humanitarian Action Guide and definition of humanitarian action**

In 2016, the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) published the Evaluation of Humanitarian Action Guide, which describes humanitarian principles as a key reference point and normative framework in evaluating humanitarian action, although it does not provide guidance on how to evaluate adherence to HPs – hence this guide. It provides the following definition of humanitarian action: “the objectives of humanitarian action are to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and in the aftermath of crises and natural disasters, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for the occurrence of such situations” (ALNAP, 2016: 24)

Humanitarian principles provide the foundational normative framework for many international humanitarian agencies, distinguishing humanitarian action from other activities, for example activities undertaken by political and military actors (see [section 2.1](#) for an overview of why HPs are important). For UN agencies, HPs are enshrined in the UN Charter and in two resolutions by the General Assembly (see key reference 2).<sup>3</sup> Their global recognition and relevance are underscored by the Code of Conduct for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Red Crescent Movement and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief and the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability.

### **Key reference 2: UN General Assembly Resolutions on humanitarian principles**

- General Assembly Resolution 46/182 of 1991: “Humanitarian assistance must be provided in accordance with the principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality”.
- General Assembly Resolution 58/114 of 2004 added the principle of “independence”: “meaning the autonomy of humanitarian objectives from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented”

In 2016, the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) made the case for the role of evaluation of humanitarian action in assessing adherence to:

Strengthening accountability through asking humanitarian actors not just how effective or efficient they are but also how well they live up to their principles would bolster consistency and build trust. If the usual evaluations and audits by which humanitarian action is assessed and funded by donors give sufficient weight to principles, it would be a practical driver of changed behaviour (WHS Secretariat, 2015: 92).

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<sup>3</sup> The UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation (2016: 10) note the key function of evaluation in promoting UN guiding principles as the first norm.

A number of other approaches and principles pursued by international humanitarian actors intersect with HPs, for example “accountability to affected people” (AAP), “do no harm”, the “humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus”. [Section 2.3](#) describes this intersection, and sometimes contradiction, between some of these frameworks and HPs. Some of these approaches, for example “accountability to affected people”, are woven through the guide.

### 1.3 Who is the guide for?

The guide is principally written for:

- Evaluation managers within UN and other international agencies who are planning, designing and managing implementation of evaluations of humanitarian action, particularly in contexts of armed conflict;
- Evaluators carrying out evaluations of humanitarian action for UN and other international agencies, as a single agency evaluation, or as a joint/multi-agency evaluation, e.g. IAHEs, particularly in contexts of armed conflict.

It is also relevant for evaluation managers and evaluators in development agencies engaged in HDP nexus programming, particularly in conflict environments.

The guide is most relevant to country-specific, multi-country, centralized and decentralized evaluations for which humanitarian action is the sole, or a major focus. These may be carried out by a single UN or other international agencies, or carried out as a multi-agency joint evaluation. The guide is also useful for an evaluation of an international agency’s policies where these relate to HPs, and to thematic evaluations where HPs are a relevant normative framework (see Table 1 for examples of evaluations that have paid attention to HPs, in each of these categories).

**Table 1: Examples of evaluations that have paid attention to HPs**

Type of evaluation	Example of an evaluation that has considered adherence to HPs
Single agency country evaluation	Evaluation of [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] UNHCR’s Response to the L3 Emergency in Afghanistan 2021–2022 (2023)
Multi-agency country evaluation	IAHE of the Yemen crisis (2022)
Policy evaluation	Evaluation of [World Food Programme] WFP’s policies on Humanitarian Principles and Access in Humanitarian Contexts (2018)
Thematic evaluations	Evaluation of the coverage and quality of the [United Nations Children’s Fund] UNICEF humanitarian response in complex humanitarian emergencies (2019)

### 1.4 How to use the guide

The guide is written according to the process of conducting an evaluation of humanitarian action, from planning the evaluation through design, implementation and follow-up. Different parts of the guide will therefore appeal to the two different target audiences in different ways, as described in Table 2.

**Table 2: Structure of the guide, and its relevance to evaluation managers and evaluators**

Section	Relevance to evaluation managers	Relevance to evaluators
<b>Section 2: Humanitarian principles – the starting point</b>	As an introduction to HPs, explaining what they are, why they matter, and why they are important to evaluate	
<b>Section 3: An overview of the implications and challenges of evaluating against HPs</b>	To ensure evaluation managers are aware of the challenges of evaluating HPs as they plan an evaluation, and have some practical solutions for dealing with these challenges	To inform evaluators of some of the common challenges of implementing a principled humanitarian response, and provide an overview of how to evaluate against these challenges
<b>Section 4: Planning to evaluate against HPs</b>	Written for the evaluation manager, to guide them through issues to be considered in planning the evaluation, to be summarized in the terms of reference (TOR)	
<b>Section 5: Addressing HPs in the inception phase</b>	A useful guide for the evaluation manager when reviewing the inception report	To guide the evaluation team through steps to be taken to ensure HPs are considered in the inception phase, culminating in the evaluation matrix
<b>Section 6: Data collection and analysis on HPs</b>	A useful guide for the evaluation manager when reviewing the data collection methods used in the evaluation	Principally for the evaluation team, to guide data collection in order to build evidence about if and how humanitarian action has been principled
<b>Section 7: Recommendations and uptake on HPs</b>	A guide for the evaluation manager on the types of recommendations on HPs that may be appropriate, and how to promote uptake through communication	To support the evaluation team think through appropriate recommendations on HPs

Key to using the guide:

- **Key references:** these are key resources/references on topics covered by the guide.
- **Examples:** these are drawn from evaluations and research studies on HPs to illustrate different aspects of evaluating adherence to HPs.
- **Tools:** these provide some practical guidance, e.g. checklists of questions, for both evaluation managers and evaluators to use.
- **Tips:** these are advice/words of wisdom from experienced evaluators and evaluation managers.

**Tip: The approach to evaluating against HPs cannot be blueprinted. It must be designed and adapted for each context and for each evaluation. This guide draws on recent experience and current thinking, to deepen understanding of evaluating against HPs and to inform how to go about it, providing resources and good practice examples.**

## 2. Humanitarian principles – the starting point

### 2.1 What are humanitarian principles?

HPs are rooted in international humanitarian law (IHL) – the right to humane treatment is at the core of IHL – but they are not legally binding. Key reference 3 explains the relationship between IHL and HPs.

The HPs of humanity and impartiality relate to the purpose and reason for humanitarian action. The HPs of neutrality and independence are sometimes described as the instrumental principles which outline the manner in which humanitarian assistance should be provided. HPs have three key functions:

1. To distinguish humanitarian response from other forms of aid in terms of *how* it is provided [linked to (2) below].
2. To provide access to conflict zones, by providing assurance to parties to armed conflict that humanitarian activities will not interfere in the conflict (see *key reference 3*).
3. As an ethical compass for humanitarian agencies, to navigate difficult choices and dilemmas in humanitarian action.<sup>4</sup>

With particular relevance to contexts of conflict, HPs cannot be regarded as absolutes, but rather as the ethical compass and normative framework to guide humanitarian decision-making. In practice, this may mean making trade-offs between HPs – a theme that runs through this guide.

#### Key reference 3: IHL and humanitarian principles

IHL is the body of rules applicable in armed conflict, that both regulates the means and methods of warfare, and protects those not taking direct part in hostilities. IHL is directly binding on states and organized armed groups engaged in conflict, who are expected to comply with their obligations under IHL. This includes neither preventing nor impeding actors that are carrying out humanitarian activities from doing so in a principled manner. But it does not require them to act in accordance with humanitarian principles.

Instead, humanitarian principles are intended to provide guidance to those carrying out humanitarian activities (protection or assistance) in times of armed conflict. HPs promote a way of operating that is intended to assure parties to the conflict that humanitarian activities will not interfere in the conflict. Compliance with humanitarian principles should thus make it more likely that operations will be accepted by belligerents, and implemented in a manner that is unimpeded and safe for humanitarian actors and beneficiaries. They are described as an operational concept, rather than legally binding. But compliance with them does have some legal consequences, for example for actors in the conflict who must not impede principled humanitarian action. This is described as the “complex interplay of humanitarian principles with IHL” (Chatham House, 2022: 13).

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<sup>4</sup> As described by an ICRC senior staff member at a Chatham House workshop entitled “The Normative Framework of Humanitarian Action in Armed Conflict”, that took place in November 2021 as part of the Chatham House ‘Sanguine Mirage’ project (Chatham House, 2024).

## 2.2 What definition of humanitarian principles should be used?

One of the central challenges to evaluating against HPs is different understandings of the HPs within the UN system. The starting point for any evaluation is therefore to assess what definitions of HPs are used by the agency concerned.

The most commonly-used definitions of HPs are provided by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)<sup>5</sup> (see key reference 4). These are the definitions that evaluation managers and evaluators should use, *unless* the respective UN agency has their own adapted definition of HPs<sup>6</sup> (see example 1 below).

### Key reference 4: Definitions of humanitarian principles

Humanity	Neutrality	Impartiality	Independence
Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings	Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature	Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions	Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented

Source: OCHA. 2012. OCHA on Message. Humanitarian Principles.

#### Example 1: How UNICEF has adapted the OCHA definitions of HPs

UNICEF’s definitions of HPs are based on the definition provided in Table 1, with some adaptations:

- There is an addition to the definition of the principle of humanity: “UNICEF upholds the principle that all girls, boys, women and men of every age shall be treated humanely and seeks to assist and protect any and every vulnerable child, treating them with dignity and respect”.
- Under impartiality, UNICEF adds to the list of factors to avoid discrimination: “ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity” (UNICEF, 2024)

In this case, they are found in UNICEF’s Core Commitments to Children in Humanitarian Action (CCC) (UNICEF, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> OCHA describes HPs as central to its mandate, with a mission to mobilize and coordinate principled humanitarian action (OCHA, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> The different definitions applied by UN agencies are discussed in UNEG, 2016.

## 2.3 How do humanitarian principles relate to other normative frameworks, standards and paradigms?

Although HPs are regarded as the foundational normative framework for humanitarian action, they are not the only normative framework or reference point used for evaluating humanitarian action. This section sets out how HPs relate to other commonly used normative frameworks and where contradictions may arise.

### A rights-based framework

The question of whether HPs are compatible with a rights-based framework, for example the Human Rights-Based Approach to Programming<sup>7</sup>, has generated much debate within the international humanitarian sector since the late 1990s. Some have argued that it is not possible to remain “neutral” and to denounce abuses of rights, for example violations of rights by parties to the conflict (Chandler, 2001). Others, and notably authors from within the ICRC, have argued that neutrality does not have to mean keeping quiet.<sup>8</sup>

### Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Action

HPs are central to Sphere, and explicit in the Sphere Handbook (see key reference 5).

#### Key reference 5: Sphere and the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS)

As an example of how HPs are integral to Sphere, the Sphere Humanitarian Charter makes the following statement on the humanitarian imperative (Sphere, 2018):

The fundamental moral principle of humanity: that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Based on this principle, we affirm the primacy of the humanitarian imperative: that action should be taken to prevent or alleviate human suffering arising out of disaster or conflict, and that nothing should override this principle (Sphere, 2018: 28).

The Sphere Minimum Standards clearly state that:

- HPs must guide all humanitarian-military dialogue and coordination;
- Assistance must be provided impartially, according to need and without discrimination, for example for protection, health care, water and other forms of humanitarian assistance;
- Annex 1 makes recommendations to governments of disaster-affected countries, recognizing their responsibility to ensure impartial access of disaster victims to humanitarian assistance;
- Annex 2 makes recommendations to donor governments to respect the impartiality, independence and humanity of humanitarian assistance.

The booklet version of the CHS clearly states that HPs are at the core of all humanitarian work. These are implicit in the CHS nine commitments and quality criteria.

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<sup>7</sup> The Human Rights-Based Approach to Programming is the UN’s strategy for implementing human rights. Others, including NGOs, may refer to a range of other core international human rights treaties (UNEG, 2014; 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Harroff-Tavel, 1989; ICRC, 2015; Schenkenberg, 2016; & Gordon and Donini, 2016 provide a good overview of the debate

## Core Humanitarian Standard

The CHS on Quality and Accountability has HPs as its foundation, using the same four definitions of HPs as appears in key reference 4.

### “Do no harm”

The principle of “do no harm” (IFRC, 2016) – avoiding or minimizing any adverse effects of humanitarian action on the affected population – is usually regarded as being compatible with HPs. In rare cases, however, there may be a contradiction that evaluators should be alert to.<sup>9</sup>

### HDP nexus

The HDP nexus refers to the interlinkages between humanitarian, development and peace actions, with the aim of strengthening collaboration, coherence and complementarity between them (OECD-DAC, 2023). There is active debate, and some unease within the humanitarian sector about how to ensure HPs are respected within HDP programming (ALNAP, 2022, Chapter 12). On the one hand, there is concern that this could dilute and compromise HPs, particularly independence and neutrality, the operational principles on which humanitarian agencies may depend to negotiate access (Tronc *et al.*, 2019). On the other hand, some have argued that the nexus is an opportunity to promote HPs, especially humanity (DuBois, 2021). This has implications for evaluation: it is likely to be a key issue, to establish the evidence on the consequences of HDP policy and programming for respect of HPs, with relevance for development agencies which may find themselves engaged in humanitarian response, e.g. in situations of protracted conflict and displacement.

#### Example 2: The relevance of HPs in evaluation of the HDP nexus

An evaluation of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)’s contribution to the HDP nexus drew attention to the importance of the Organization having a clear corporate commitment or statement on HPs, to guide leadership and ensure coherence in the humanitarian component of its work within nexus ways of working, particularly in challenging conflict environments (FAO, 2021).

### Humanitarian resistance

HPs do not work for all humanitarian actors, nor for all forms of humanitarian action. A number of agencies providing humanitarian assistance – often (but not only) national and regional NGOs – reject HPs as a normative framework. Instead they embrace the concepts of humanitarian resistance and humanitarian solidarity (see key reference 6 for a definition of humanitarian resistance). Humanitarian resistance as a reference point may increase as localization of humanitarian action progresses. While UN agencies’ commitment to HPs is clear, what does this plurality of approaches mean for evaluations of humanitarian action? For guidance on this, see [section 6.11](#) on evaluating partnership through the lens of HPs.

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<sup>9</sup> The evaluation of UNHCR’s Response to the L3 Emergency in Afghanistan in 2021–2022 identified a contradiction whereby UNHCR halted gender-based violence (GBV) activities in order to protect women and girls from potential interference by the de facto authorities – thus adhering to the “do no harm” principle, but as a result compromising the HP of humanity.



### **Key reference 6: Humanitarian resistance and solidarity**

The Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN) published a Network Paper on “humanitarian resistance” providing the following definition of humanitarian resistance:

Humanitarian resistance is the rescue, relief and protection of people suffering under an unjust enemy regime. It is specifically organized by individuals and groups who are politically opposed to the regime and support resistance against it because of their political commitments or personal conscience. Humanitarian resistance takes sides and is carried out without enemy consent, often covertly and at great personal risk (Slim, 2022: 7).

The Network Paper distinguishes humanitarian resistance from “solidarity” as follows: solidarity is a commitment to unity and common cause, but when it is action, this means “resisting” enemy power, hence the distinction with “humanitarian resistance”.

### **Frameworks that require close collaboration with government**

The Paris Declaration and other international commitments emphasize the importance of UN agencies working with national governments during international crises and in their development work. Attempting to work with governments which are party to a conflict can result in violation of the HPs, e.g. in the case of Sri Lanka (UN, 2012), and in the Northern Ethiopia crisis in 2021–22. How UN agencies manage their relationship with government, and how closely they work with government,<sup>10</sup> especially in highly politicized complex humanitarian crises, is perhaps one of the most challenging decisions that UN agencies must make, especially as the UN itself is an intergovernmental organization. This should therefore be a key element in evaluation against the HPs. Further guidance is provided in [section 6.9](#).

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<sup>10</sup> Recognizing that some, like FAO, are constitutionally mandated to work with government.

### 3. An overview of the implications and challenges of evaluating against HPs – setting the scene

#### 3.1 Nine challenges of evaluating against humanitarian principles – how to address them?

The challenges of evaluating against HPs is part of the reason they are often overlooked in a broad-ranging evaluation in favour of evaluating more immediate and measurable programme aspects, such as the timeliness of delivery and the relevance of the assistance provided. Being aware of the challenges of evaluating against HPs, and potential solutions, will help to ensure that HPs do feature more consistently in evaluations of humanitarian action. Table 3 summarizes some of the most common challenges to evaluating against HPs that evaluation managers and evaluators are likely to face. It also offers practical solutions for each challenge, that can be taken by evaluation managers and/or by evaluators, most of which are elaborated in later sections of the guide.

**Table 3: Practical solutions to common challenges of evaluating against HPs**

Challenge	Practical solutions that can be implemented by the evaluation manager	Practical solutions that can be implemented by the evaluators
Senior leadership and programme managers are reluctant to have their strategies and programmes evaluated against HPs for a range of reasons including political sensitivity and concerns that challenging practical dilemmas and decisions made may be subject to public scrutiny and exposure.	Over time, evaluation offices and the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) can make the case for evaluating against HPs, with the reminder that UN agencies are accountable to the two UN General Resolutions on HPs.  During the evaluation planning stage, evaluation managers can listen for concerns expressed by the evaluand and explore, early in the process, how these concerns can be addressed to build ownership and acceptance of evaluation against HPs, e.g. focus on learning rather than accountability.	Evaluators can use the inception phase to develop approaches and methods that take the evaluand’s concerns into account, while not backing off from evaluating against HPs.
Evaluation against HPs requires knowledge and understanding of how to operationalize HPs, often in complex contexts, including how and why trade-offs may be needed. Many evaluation managers and evaluators have limited expertise on HPs.	Consider supporting the team and evaluation manager with an experienced resource person/adviser with knowledge of HPs.	Ensure at least one member of the evaluation team has strong expertise on HPs.
There is rarely explicit reference to HPs in agency country-level strategies, or in planning or programming documents (with the exception of system-wide	In the planning stage and therefore in the TOR, evaluation managers can identify the commitments the agency has made to HPs, that	Evaluators can explore whether HPs were implicit in planning and programming, using proxy indicators.

Challenge	Practical solutions that can be implemented by the evaluation manager	Practical solutions that can be implemented by the evaluators
strategies and plans, e.g. Humanitarian Response Plans [HRPs]). Agencies rarely explicitly monitor their performance against HPs.	evaluators should use as the reference point.	
There is often a wide range of familiarity with, and understanding of HPs amongst staff and between agencies. Staff from a development background may be less familiar with HPs.	This itself could usefully be a focus of the evaluation, with an evaluation question or subquestion on staff understanding of HPs, definitions used and the implications.	Evaluators should be clear what definitions of HPs they are using. They can use indirect questioning and active listening to explore how HPs are understood by staff. The implications of a range of different levels of familiarity and understanding can be built into the team’s analysis.
Evaluating HPs means covering sensitive political issues. The stakes are high if this is done clumsily, naively and/or irresponsibly, and could put in-country staff, partners, affected communities and indeed the entire operation at risk.	In the evaluation planning stage, the evaluation manager can assess the risks, what it is feasible/appropriate to explore in the evaluation, and how to mitigate the risks.	The inception phase is also an opportunity to assess the risks of evaluating HPs, and designing and modifying the approach and methods accordingly. Evaluators should themselves follow the “do no harm” principle throughout the evaluation process.
Adhering to HPs in complex conflict environments is not absolute, but requires trade-offs between HPs, and may also require trade-offs with other normative frameworks, sometimes on a daily basis.	In the evaluation planning stage, evaluation managers can identify some of the key trade-offs and dilemmas pertinent to the programme to be evaluated, highlighting them in the “background” section in the TOR.	As evaluators are usually carrying out the fieldwork and primary data collection over a short period of time, and HPs are just one of a number of issues to explore, it is therefore advisable to restrict the investigation to <i>how</i> trade-offs were made and <i>why</i> , possibly extending to whether compromises in HPs were appropriate in the circumstances, rather than investigating the impact of those trade-offs, unless substantial resources are available and this is identified as critical to the evaluation.
Evaluation of adherence to HPs requires an evaluation of decision-making processes. Yet these are not always recorded, and sensitive decisions may have been made “behind closed doors”, and day-to-day decisions made “on the hoof”.	In the planning stage of the evaluation, evaluation managers can discuss with senior management how best to create the conditions during the evaluation to encourage discussion about sensitive decision-making (e.g. ensuring anonymity).	Evaluators can usefully focus on what has guided decision-making as well as the actual decisions made.  Key informant interviews based on open discussion and “storytelling” approaches may be best suited to understand how decisions were made and the extent to which they were guided by HPs.

Challenge	Practical solutions that can be implemented by the evaluation manger	Practical solutions that can be implemented by the evaluators
<p>Where an agency is engaged in both development and humanitarian programming, it may be challenging to draw a boundary around what is “humanitarian action” and what is “development” within a particular context, especially in protracted crises.</p>	<p>In clarifying the scope of what is to be evaluated, the TOR for the evaluation can usefully clarify what is regarded as “humanitarian” as opposed to “development”. If this is not clear, the implications of this lack of clarity can be highlighted in the TOR for the evaluation to explore.</p>	<p>The evaluation is an opportunity to explore how implementing both humanitarian and development work in the same context may have impacted stakeholder perceptions of how/whether the agency’s humanitarian work has followed HPs.</p>
<p>In an evaluation of a single UN agency, it may be hard to isolate that agency’s work when evaluating against HPs, from the work and influence of other UN and humanitarian agencies (this is a similar challenge to evaluating the impact of humanitarian action).</p>	<p>Where the challenges of adhering to HPs is an issue for the entire international humanitarian community, evaluation managers may want to ensure this is explored in an IAHE.</p>	<p>In a single agency evaluation evaluators can still explore a) the extent to which a single agency has been able to follow HPs unilaterally; and b) the consequences of decisions made at a higher level within the UN/by the United Nations country team (UNCT) for an individual agency’s ability to operate in a principled way.</p>

**Tip: Consider involving a “resource person” and/or “peer reviewer” with expertise in HPs (e.g. researcher or experienced evaluator) to advise the evaluation manager and evaluation team on how to handle some of these generic challenges, and how to address other challenges specific to the humanitarian context in which the evaluation is taking place.**

## 4. Planning to evaluate against humanitarian principles

### 4.1 Introduction

This section guides the evaluation manager through the planning process for an evaluation that references HPs as one of the normative frameworks. This is set out as a number of steps. The outcome of the planning phase is captured and summarized in the evaluation terms of reference.

### 4.2 How to assess the feasibility of evaluating against HPs

Evaluability assessments are rarely carried out in advance of humanitarian evaluations, with a few exceptions. More often, evaluation managers carry out a short informal exercise to explore the feasibility of an evaluation, for example in terms of scope and timing. Given the challenges and potential sensitivity of evaluating against HPs, evaluation managers can explore how HPs can be integrated into an evaluation of humanitarian action, as part of that early planning exercise.

Tool 1 presents a list of questions to consider, using the three “D’s” of an evaluability assessment: demand, design and data (DFID, 2013), and also the risks.

#### **Tool 1: Questions to consider when carrying out an evaluability assessment/feasibility exercise of an evaluation against HPs**

- 1) Demand for the evaluation:
  - What is the likely acceptance of, and appetite for evaluating adherence to HPs, e.g. among the Governing Body and senior managers? (Are there champions for this?)
  - How can demand be generated (see [Tip](#) below)?
  - Where is political opposition to the evaluation likely to come from, and what is the likelihood that opposition will lead to “shelving” of the evaluation?
  - Are other means for reviewing performance against HPs more appropriate and more likely to have traction (see [section 4.4](#) below)?
- 2) Design of the intervention:
  - To what extent do HPs appear to have been taken into account in programming (as a preliminary assessment, to be pursued in greater detail in the inception and main evaluation phases)?
  - Have there been serious issues related to HPs in the humanitarian response to be evaluated – e.g. in securing access, maintaining neutrality and independence – that an evaluation could throw light upon?
- 3) Data:
  - What kinds of data and information are available (or not) from key stakeholders on relevant issues such as access, negotiation and decision-making?
  - Will it be possible to create a “safe space” where stakeholders can speak openly about sensitive issues, e.g. negotiating access, decision-making, making trade-offs in HPs? How can interview data be used without breaching confidentiality and anonymity?

4) Risk:

- What are the risks associated with evaluating adherence to HPs, e.g. operational, security, reputational, financial risks?
- How can these risks be mitigated?
- What are the risks of not carrying out an evaluation of HPs?

Example 3 describes a partial evaluability assessment carried out by WFP for an evaluation on HPs.

**Example 3: Partial evaluability assessment carried out by WFP when considering an evaluation on HPs**

Ahead of launching an evaluation of its policies on humanitarian principles and access in humanitarian contexts, WFP carried out a partial evaluability assessment, which was completed in the inception phase. This identified some of the main limitations for the evaluation, such as the lack of an explicit theory of change for the policy documents under investigation, and gaps in the availability of certain data. Anticipated data gaps included: staff and partners involved in negotiations and decisions about different principles and trade-offs between them not being willing to share relevant information for fear of negative consequences for their security, the projects they are responsible for, or their career; and challenges in making comparisons with the policies and practices of other organizations as few comparable assessments have been carried out and, given the sensitivity of the topic, agencies may not be willing to share relevant documents and information with the WFP evaluation team. The evaluability assessment also elaborated the risks associated with the evaluation, identified in the terms of reference. These included security risks, reputational and associated financial risks, the risk of triggering overly restricted rules, and the risk of the evaluation not being perceived as credible. The reputational and operational risks of not conducting the evaluation were also considered, with the conclusion that the evaluation would be highly relevant in the current context.

Source: WFP. 2017. Evaluation of WFP's Policies on Humanitarian Principles and Access in Humanitarian Contexts. Terms of reference.

Building acceptance of HPs as a key normative framework for an evaluation of humanitarian action requires early conversations with the evaluand, to understand any reservations and sensitivities, to adapt the approach accordingly and to begin building trust.

**Tip: Finding a champion at senior leadership level for evaluating against HPs can really facilitate acceptance of HPs as a key normative framework (e.g. Humanitarian Coordinator/ Regional Coordinator for an IAHE; the Country Representative for a single agency evaluation).**

### 4.3 When is it appropriate to evaluate against HPs as the normative framework?

Although HPs provide the fundamental normative framework for the UN's humanitarian work, it may not be appropriate to include them in every evaluation of humanitarian action. There are two sets of questions evaluation managers should ask when deciding whether and how to evaluate against HPs (see Tool 2).

## **Tool 2: Key questions to assess if HPs should be used as the normative framework for an evaluation**

1. What is being evaluated, and are HPs the most appropriate normative framework?

For certain types of evaluation, for example a “process evaluation” that explores how inputs are converted into outputs (rather than outcomes and impact), such as a water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) project in a specific location, HPs may be less immediately relevant than another normative framework such as the Sphere technical standards, (although even a small-scale WASH programme should be principled, for example needs-based to meet the principle of impartiality). In contrast, in an evaluation of a UN agency’s response to a humanitarian crisis related to conflict, in a particular country or region, or of an inter-agency humanitarian response to crisis, it may be entirely appropriate, indeed essential, to place HPs at the heart of the evaluation, both to learn from performance and to hold the agency/wider international humanitarian community to account on HPs.

2. Should HPs be the only normative framework to be used?

In the planning phase, the evaluation manager can review with the programme team and other key stakeholders whether the evaluation should focus on the four core HPs alone, or should include additional “principles” or standards, for example “do no harm” (see example 4).

### **Example 4: WFP evaluation of its corporate emergency response in Myanmar (2018–2022)**

In this evaluation there was a specific evaluation question on HPs and on “do no harm”:

“In what way does WFP adhere to humanitarian principles and ‘do no harm’ in all phases of its assistance? How does WFP manage the trade-offs between humanitarian principles?”

## **4.4 Is an evaluation the best approach for investigating adherence to HPs?**

### **The case for integrating HPs into evaluation of humanitarian action**

Although the track record of integrating HPs into evaluation of humanitarian action is weak, as this is the fundamental normative framework for humanitarian action, enshrined in UN General Assembly Resolutions (see key reference 2), there is a strong case for ensuring UN agencies are held to account for, and learn from the experience of applying a principled approach in some of the world’s most complex and challenging humanitarian crises.

### **The case for using a different approach to investigate adherence to HPs**

If adherence to HPs is considered to be *the* most important issue to explore, for example to improve effectiveness of the humanitarian response, it may be more appropriate to commission a research study or review dedicated to this topic (see 1a in example 5).

If investigation into the application of principled humanitarian action is regarded as too politically sensitive to be subject to an evaluation in the public domain, and the main objective is for the organization(s) to learn internally, it may be more appropriate to commission an internal learning process or a confidential review, carried out by known and trusted researchers (see point 2 in Example 5).

#### **Example 5: Other ways of assessing performance against HPs, apart from evaluation**

- 1) *A research study*, commissioned externally or carried out by researchers internally: see, for example:
  - a. A research study into Principled Humanitarian Programming in Yemen, commissioned by the European Commission Humanitarian Aid (ECHO) and carried out by HERE-Geneva in 2021, in response to concerns about the effectiveness of the humanitarian response, six years into the crisis.
  - b. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and Handicap International (2016) review of challenges in applying HPs in four countries.
- 2) **An internal learning process**, which could complement an external evaluation: see, for example, the WFP 2017 evaluation of its policies on HPs and access in humanitarian contexts. Or this could be a stand-alone internal learning process (see also point 3 below).
- 3) **An internal review** of performance against HPs: see, for example, Action Against Hunger (ACF)'s review of "Humanitarian Principles in Conflict". As well as stating ACF's position on the application of HPs, this review captures ACF's experience of applying HPs and challenges faced.

## **4.5 Why is the scope of the evaluation relevant?**

### **Geographic scope**

If HPs are to be a key normative framework for evaluation of humanitarian action, this may have implications for the scope of the evaluation, in particular its geographic coverage. When considering the scope of the evaluation, the evaluation manager should ask the two following questions:

1. In a country where the evaluation is to take place, how can the scope of the evaluation be defined to ensure the evaluation team collects data and evidence in geographical areas, and from population groups on different sides of the conflict, for example to evaluate the impartiality and independence of the response? How can the evaluation team's access be facilitated OR how can they evaluate remotely?
2. At the regional or global levels, how does the scope need to be defined to ensure the impartiality, independence and neutrality of the response are evaluated at a higher level of geographical aggregation?

#### **Example 6: Defining the scope of the evaluation so that adherence to HPs can be evaluated – learning from Ukraine**

- Despite the challenges of access, the evaluation must look at the agency's efforts to cover the whole country, including Russian-held areas, in order to evaluate adherence to HPs within Ukraine. This should be clear in the scope of the evaluation, even if the evaluation team's access to parts of the country is constrained.
- In order to assess HPs at the regional and/or global levels, the evaluation team must look at the level of the humanitarian response within Ukraine compared with the response in neighbouring countries and in response to humanitarian crises in other parts of the world.



## Single agency versus multi-agency evaluation

If this is a single agency evaluation of its humanitarian response, consider what is feasible for the evaluation team to explore in relation to HPs, for example how HPs have been taken into account in the coverage of its response.

As described in [section 3.1](#), evaluating the collective approach to adhering to HPs may be particularly insightful, for example in terms of how access has been negotiated at a high level (by the Humanitarian Coordinator, or by OCHA) and the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) approach as a whole.

## Bounding humanitarian action

Where an evaluation covers more than humanitarian action, for example a country programme evaluation that covers development as well as humanitarian programming, or an evaluation of HDP nexus programming, as far as possible clarify which parts are considered to be humanitarian and therefore should be guided by HPs. It may also be useful to evaluate whether other activities are guided by HPs, e.g. more developmental interventions, and the consequences if they are not, e.g., for how the agency is perceived.

## 4.6 How to identify the focus for evaluating adherence to HPs

The particular challenge of ensuring humanitarian action is principled varies from one crisis to another, as indicated in [section 3.1](#) above. In the planning phase, evaluation managers can begin to identify the challenges in the humanitarian response to be evaluated through:

1. Reviewing analysis of the political context of the crisis from different sources, e.g. context analysis by the agency itself, by the wider UN/HCT, by political analysts and think tanks within the country or region, or at the global level;
2. Early discussions with senior leadership and management of the response to be evaluated, which is also an opportunity to emphasize how the evaluation can be of use to them.

The particular challenges identified can be highlighted in the “background” section of the terms of reference and captured in the evaluation questions (see example 7).

### Example 7: Evaluation of WFP’s response to the Syrian crisis

The terms of reference for the evaluation of WFP’s Regional Response to the Syrian crisis (WFP, 2015) explored the issue of HPs in some depth, noting: “there have been trade-offs between aligning with wider-system and/or national priorities on the one hand, with WFP’s mandate, policies and Humanitarian Principles, on the other” and requesting a specific team member with relevant expertise as follows: “Extensive knowledge of humanitarian law and principles, and experience with using human rights, protection and gender analysis in evaluations, as well as familiarity with the Transformative Agenda.”

Source: WFP. 2015. An Evaluation of WFP’s Regional Response to the Syrian Crisis, 2011-2014. Rome.

## 4.7 How to include HPs in evaluation questions

Like most evaluations of humanitarian action, questions on HPs cannot be standardized. They should be identified and articulated according to the context and the particular angle that the evaluation is exploring. This, in turn, should be informed by the political context analysis, as outlined above. Since the questions must be contextualized, this implies careful planning and consultation between the evaluation manager and programme staff, informed by analysis of the political context. This consultation should be guided by the following question:

**What do you need to know about performance against HPs that will make a difference?<sup>11</sup>**

Example 8 provides evaluation questions from recent evaluations that focus on HPs, where these have been part of a wider humanitarian evaluation. All are pitched at a high level, in accordance with the guidance provided by ALNAP’s Evaluation of Humanitarian Action Guide (see section 6) to have a small number of relevant overarching questions.

How these evaluation questions are broken down is the job of the evaluation team when drafting the evaluation matrix in the inception phase. It is also up to the evaluation team to decide which questions should be directed at different stakeholders, and how those questions should be formulated in the interview process.

The ultimate issue is what difference it has made for UN agencies to follow HPs, in terms of achieving an effective and appropriate humanitarian response. As noted by the UNEG 2016 report, and a review of documentation since, there is still little available evidence on this. If UN agencies can build a body of evidence of the impact of principled humanitarian action through its evaluations, it could contribute to filling this gap.

### Example 8: Examples of evaluation questions on HPs from UN evaluations

Humanitarian principle	OECD/DAC criterion the question relates to in the TOR	Examples of relevant evaluation questions
Overall on all four humanitarian principles	Coherence	<p><b>WFP EVALUATION OF L3 RESPONSE IN NORTHEAST NIGERIA</b></p> <p>Main evaluation question, under appropriateness of the design and delivery of the emergency response:</p> <p><b>How were the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence – and a “do no harm” commitment – applied in the response?</b></p> <p>Subquestions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent were humanitarian principles applied in all phases of the programme cycle?</li> <li>• How were trade-offs between humanitarian principles managed?</li> </ul>

<sup>11</sup> This question is based on “Utilisation-focused evaluation” (Patton, 2008).



questions for different stakeholders, and to guide the evaluation team. Such knowledge and expertise may come from programme management, having attempted to implement principled humanitarian action in conflict environments, from research or from former evaluations. This expertise could be provided by the team leader. However, as relatively few evaluators currently have skills and expertise in evaluating HPs, it may be necessary to reach out to researchers of humanitarian action where these skillsets are generally stronger. Such a researcher could be a member of the evaluation team, or appointed as a resource person to support and mentor the evaluation team in addressing the questions that relate to HPs, for example helping them think through what data to collect and how judgments will be formed when drafting the evaluation matrix, and supporting the evaluation team remotely during data collection and analysis.

It is essential that one or more team members have a strong understanding and knowledge of the local context, and especially of the local political context, to understand the nuances of how HPs have been applied, threatened and/or compromised.

While agency evaluation policies often talk about protecting the impartiality and independence of the evaluation, these terms have a rather different meaning in a conflict environment where HPs are being evaluated. It is not just the independence of the evaluation from the agency intervention that matters, but also the actual and perceived independence of the evaluation team from the conflict itself. While this is important to all evaluations of humanitarian action, it is amplified where HPs are to be considered. This may have implications for the ethnicity and gender of different national team members and their language skills to ensure they have access to different parts of the country and to different population groups, making sure the evaluation team is balanced and perceived as such.

**Tip: Evaluation managers with experience of relevant evaluations that use HPs as their normative framework advise on the need to prioritize humanitarian expertise and knowledge in the evaluation team over evaluation experience, to ensure HPs are well-understood and the evaluation approach, methods and analysis take account of HPs.**

**Tip: In at least a couple of evaluations that cover HPs, an effective approach has been to assign one team member to lead on HPs, as well as on other related issues (e.g. civil-military coordination, accountability to affected people). In both cases, this was not the team leader, although the team leader maintained the overview.<sup>12</sup>**

## **4.9 How should evaluation findings of adherence to HPs be reported upon?**

Most UN agency evaluations of humanitarian action are in the public domain, normally available on their website as part of the agency's commitment to accountability. In some circumstances it may not be appropriate for the details of an evaluation of HPs to end up in the public domain, for example if revealing information about how the agency negotiated access with one side in the conflict would jeopardize its ability to work on another side in the conflict, and/or whether exposing some of the compromises that the agency has had to make to remain operational would put its staff, partners and/or the affected population at risk. There are a number of options to consider, including:

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<sup>12</sup> This was the case for the IAHE Yemen evaluation, completed in 2022, and also the evaluation of the WFP L3 response in Northeast Nigeria in 2019.

1. Putting the whole evaluation in the public domain, but not disclosing the names of those consulted, and ensuring that no findings or personal experiences in the report are attributable to individuals interviewed. Anonymizing the findings can be taken a step further, if appropriate and necessary, to remove other identification markers such as type of programme and/or geographic location.
2. Putting a summary evaluation report of the main conclusions and recommendations in the public domain, but the detailed findings and evidence, including case studies that support the findings are written as a confidential annex shared with senior management in-country and at regional and/or headquarters level.
3. For a thematic evaluation based on a number of case studies, anonymizing and generalizing the findings on adherence to HPs across case studies so that individual case studies and decisions made cannot be traced or attributed to any one case, or one leadership team.

Decisions about whether and how the evaluation findings are going to be in the public domain, how they are going to be communicated to key stakeholders and what will remain confidential should be made during the planning stage of the evaluation in discussion with intended evaluation users. These decisions should then be clearly communicated to interviewees and stakeholders consulted during the evaluation process, so they can judge how “safe” they feel to disclose sensitive information.

## 4.10 How to reflect HPs in the terms of reference

The results of the planning phase of the evaluation should be summarized in the terms of reference. Tool 3 highlights issues to consider when using HPs as the normative framework for evaluating humanitarian action, against the usual checklist for the TOR.

### Tool 3: Issues to consider when drawing up the TOR

Checklist for inclusion in the TOR	Issues to consider when evaluating against HPs
Purpose and objectives of the evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarify whether the evaluation is more learning or more accountability-oriented, as this should inform how the evaluation is designed and may influence the extent to which staff are prepared to discuss sensitive issues and dilemmas they have faced in following HPs in contested conflict crises.</li> </ul>
Intended use and intended users of the evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relates to the overall purpose of the evaluation to inform decisions about how sensitive evaluation findings on principled humanitarian action will be reported upon.</li> </ul>
Contextual analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include analysis of the political context and indicate the particular issues and challenges that have been faced in implementing principled humanitarian action.</li> </ul>
Frameworks and benchmarks to be used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly indicate HPs as (one of) the normative frameworks to be used.</li> <li>• Clarify which other benchmarks and standards are to be used, and which of them relate specifically to HPs, e.g. principle of “do no harm”, Sphere Standards.</li> </ul>
Scope of the evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indicate the geographic scope of the evaluation and therefore over what geographic coverage adherence to HPs is to be evaluated.</li> </ul>

Checklist for inclusion in the TOR	Issues to consider when evaluating against HPs
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clarify how humanitarian action is defined and bounded so it is clear to which part of a larger programme the HPs apply, while also considering whether to explore the consequences of other parts of the programme not adhering to HPs.</li> </ul>
Evaluation questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Include at least one specific evaluation question on HPs.</li> </ul>
Skills and knowledge requirements of the evaluation team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Indicate the need for sound humanitarian expertise in the evaluation team, with particular mention of HPs.</li> </ul>
Roles and responsibilities during the evaluation process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Who in the evaluation team will lead on HPs?</li> <li>Where there are risks associated with evaluating against HPs, indicate where responsibility for managing those risks lies, e.g. with the evaluation management, senior leadership in-country, evaluation team.</li> </ul>
Deliverables, timetable and communication strategy for the evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Indicate how evaluation findings on HPs are to be communicated, e.g. in the main report in the public domain, in a confidential annex, etc.</li> </ul>
Ethical issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Indicate how issues of confidentiality and anonymity are to be handled by the evaluation team.</li> </ul>

## 5. Designing the evaluation – addressing HPs in the inception phase

### 5.1 How should HPs be incorporated into inception phase activities?

The inception phase is an opportunity for the evaluation team to develop a deeper understanding of the evaluation task and to prepare a report outlining the plan for the evaluation and the proposed methods, including how the normative HP framework will be used (as described in ALNAP, 2016, section 8). This should include:

1. **Ensuring members of the evaluation team have a sound understanding of HPs, and of their relevance to the humanitarian action being evaluated**, recognizing that it is unlikely that all evaluation team members will have deep understanding of the HPs. Whichever team member has the greatest knowledge and experience of HPs can be tasked with briefing other team members, during the inception phase, on HPs as a normative framework, and the particular challenges emerging in following HPs in the humanitarian crisis/programme of concern.
2. **Reviewing the respective UN agency’s policies and commitments on HPs** so that the reference points for answering evaluation questions on adherence to HPs are clear, including clarifying which definition of HPs to use.
3. **Assessing the extent to which HPs as a normative framework are mainstreamed into the organization’s humanitarian planning and programming**, at all levels from headquarters to field level, to inform how the evaluation engages with HPs, for example how explicit the reference can be in key informant interviews, how much sensitivity there is likely to be, and therefore how detailed discussions are likely to be (see Example 9).

#### Example 9: Different approaches to addressing HPs for different organizations

One experienced evaluator of humanitarian action described the difference between doing an evaluation for an organization where HPs are:

- Well mainstreamed and understood, and it was possible to have the same type of in-depth discussion about adherence to HPs at headquarters and at field levels; and
- Used much less as the reference point, requiring more conscious engagement of senior management on the topic of HPs from the beginning, including ongoing dialogue and communication in preparation for negative findings on adherence to HPs.

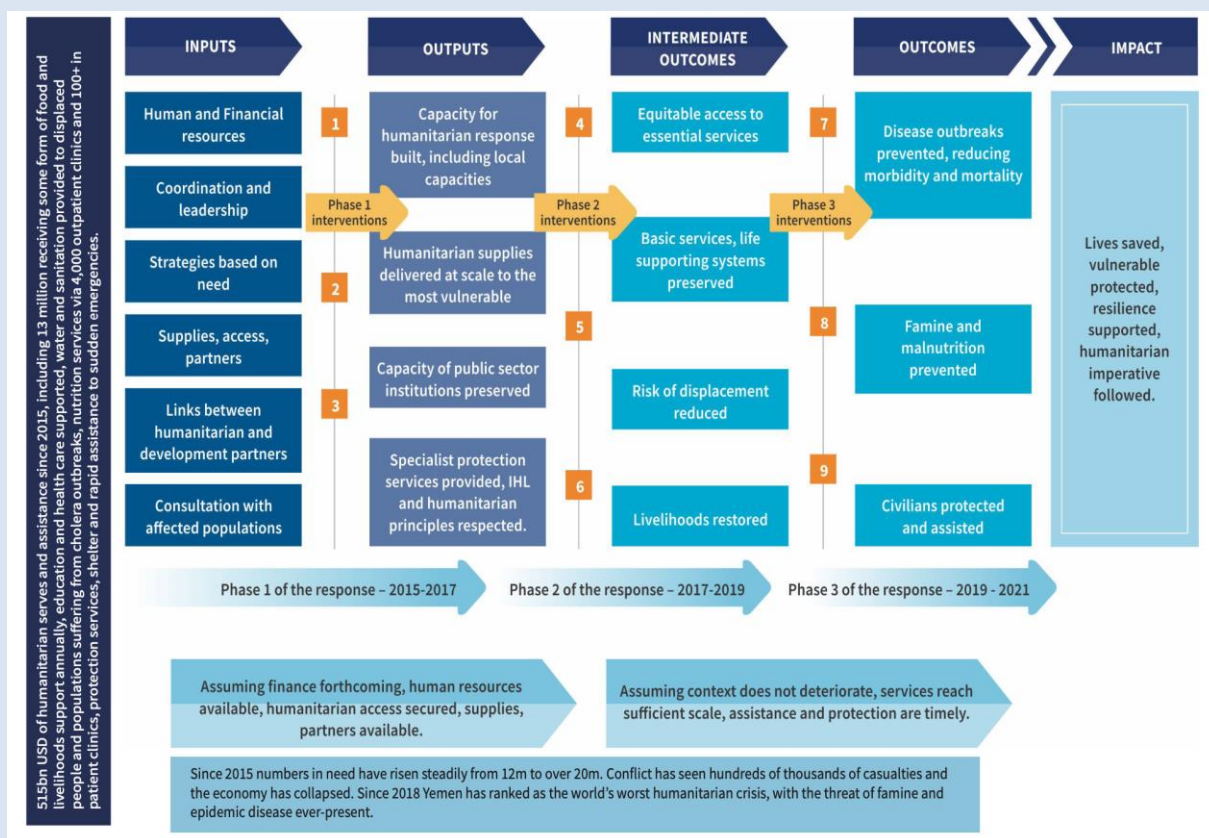
4. Building on the terms of reference, **reviewing political analyses of the context, the humanitarian crisis and the response**, to inform the evaluation team’s understanding of where the challenges to principled humanitarian action have risen, to inform the design of the evaluation matrix. If the team finds that existing analyses of the context are inadequate, they could use the inception phase to commission a deeper analysis of the political context. This step will be of value to the entire evaluation, not just the HP part of the evaluation.

5. **If a theory of change or logic model for the humanitarian action has to be constructed retrospectively, ensuring HPs are integrated into this theory of change** (see example 10 from the IAHE of the Yemen response). If a theory of change already exists, review whether HPs are implicit or explicit within it, and if not, discuss with programme staff how they can be integrated so they are a clear reference point.

**Tip:** Note that there are no clear conventions about where HPs should appear in a theory of change. “Adherence to HPs” could be an explicit cross-cutting issue in the theory of change.<sup>13</sup> HPs might also appear, implicitly, under “outcome areas”, for example “displaced receive humanitarian assistance and are protected”, and/or implicitly under “strategies to achieve change”, for example “targeting assistance to the most needy, according to needs assessments”. As in the Yemen IAHE, the humanitarian imperative might appear under “impact”.

**Example 10: Reconstructed theory of change for the international humanitarian response to the Yemen crisis**

In this theory of change, HPs are presented as an “output”, alongside specialist protection services. Following the humanitarian imperative is presented as an “impact”.



Source: IAHE. 2022. Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) of the Yemen Crisis. Annex 2. Geneva, Switzerland. <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluation-iahe-yemen-crisis>

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the Corporate Thematic Evaluation of UN Women’s Contribution to Humanitarian Action.



6. **Considering a framework for evaluating against HPs.** This can range from a simple model of “Enablers” and “Obstacles” to principled humanitarian action (IAHE, 2022), to a more detailed research framework.<sup>14</sup>
7. **Developing the approach and methods through which adherence to HPs will be evaluated, including anticipated constraints, and how to ensure confidentiality** (see [section 5.3](#) below on the evaluation matrix).

## 5.2 How to include HPs in the data collection methods used in the inception phase

1. **HPs in the document review:** A preliminary review of documentation is almost always part of the inception phase, providing a preliminary analysis for the evaluation as a whole. To ensure this is carried out with a filter for HPs, consider the following:
  - a. Review the context analysis carried out by the agency(ies) concerned, for in-depth analysis of the political economy of the humanitarian crisis and response, and therefore understanding of the challenges to principled humanitarian action, even if this is implicit rather than explicit.
  - b. Review needs assessments to gain a preliminary understanding of the extent to which the agency(ies) have attempted to reach all population groups in need, no matter where they are located and who they are.
  - c. Scan planning and programming documents, including the Humanitarian Response Plan, for evidence that HPs have been considered, implicitly or explicitly.
  - d. Carry out a preliminary analysis of funding sources to be alert to the potential implications for independence, e.g. if the agency(ies) are overly-dependent on particular sources of funding which could compromise their independence.
  - e. Assess how decision-making has been documented, to inform how this can be evaluated in the main phase of the evaluation.
2. **Key informant interviews:** For KIIs carried out in the inception phase with senior and middle-level managers of the agency concerned, consider the following issues/questions for the interview checklists:
  - a. Organizational engagement with HPs:
    - i. How well-understood, and how widely-understood, are HPs within the agency?

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the research report commissioned by the Danish Refugee Council (2023) on Principled Humanitarian Action in Afghanistan.

- ii. What kind of guidance or training materials on HPs exist, if any, to support staff?
  - iii. What **channels** exist for the organization to learn about principled humanitarian action, from one humanitarian crisis to another?
- b. Crisis-specific challenges to principled humanitarian action:
- i. What have been the main challenges in providing principled humanitarian action in this specific humanitarian crisis? (*Be prepared to spell out the four HPs*)
  - ii. Where can **evidence** be found on adherence to HPs?
  - iii. How can this evaluation best support the agency in its efforts to provide principled humanitarian action, from an accountability and learning perspective? (*Use this **question** to gauge sensitivities around the evaluation exploring adherence to HPs, and to inform the approach and methods*)

**Tip: How the evaluation team engages with the agency's senior and middle-level management in the inception phase is key to beginning to build a relationship of trust, for example providing reassurance on confidentiality, which in turn is key to encouraging managers to talk frankly about challenges they have faced in following HPs.**

### 5.3 How to incorporate HPs as a key point of reference in the evaluation matrix

This is an opportunity for the evaluation team to indicate what evidence they will be looking for when evaluating adherence to HPs, and also how that evidence will be gathered in terms of sources of data. Different agencies have slightly different templates for their evaluation matrix (see examples 11 and 12 from a UNICEF and WFP evaluation, respectively).

**Example 11: Extract from the evaluation matrix from the 2019 UNICEF evaluation of Coverage and Quality of its humanitarian response in complex humanitarian emergencies**

Evaluation questions and subquestions related to HPs	Indicators	Data collection methods and sources	Analytical methods
<p>3.1 To what extent has UNICEF’s engagement in complex humanitarian emergencies been guided by the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, and what effect have these had on coverage and quality?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How successfully has UNICEF been able to manage constraints imposed by the application of the principles, as well as any trade-offs between the principles?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evidence that staff have an understanding of humanitarian principles (UNICEF’s humanitarian principles)</li> <li>Evidence that a principled approach has guided decision-making to support improvements in coverage and quality</li> <li>Evidence that application of principles has had a positive impact on coverage and quality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Document and literature review</li> <li>Interviews with UNICEF headquarters, Regional and Country Office staff; Regional Coordinator/ Humanitarian Coordinator, cluster members, donors, implementing partners</li> <li>Identification, review and documentation of case studies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cross-country case study analysis</li> <li>Analysis of decision-making criteria around application of approaches to improve access</li> </ul>

Source: UNICEF. 2019. Evaluation of the coverage and quality of the UNICEF humanitarian response in complex humanitarian emergencies. Annex 2.

**Example 12: Extract from the evaluation matrix from the inception report for the WFP evaluation of its Corporate (L3) Response in Northeast Nigeria**

Evaluation questions and subquestions related to HPs	Indicators	Source of evidence	Strength of evidence
<p>How were the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence – and a “do no harm” commitment – applied in the response?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent were humanitarian principles applied in all phases of the programme cycle?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evidence that WFP strategy and programming respected the four humanitarian principles</li> <li>Adherence to humanitarian principles as criteria for partnership selection</li> <li>Context-specific tensions between principles identified and managed</li> <li>Advocacy conducted by WFP on the humanitarian principles</li> <li>Civil-military guidelines applied in WFP operational relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Polices, Strategies and operational plans; needs and context assessments; monitoring data and reports; national/international KIIs; state-level KIIs</li> </ul>	Medium

Source: WFP. 2019. WFP’s Corporate Emergency Response in Northeast Nigeria (2016–2018). Inception report. Rome.

## 6. Carrying out the evaluation: data collection and analysis on HPs

### 6.1 Introduction

This section is organized according to the issues, and therefore types of evidence the evaluation must compile and analyse on HPs. It provides examples of the main data collection methods the evaluation team can use to gather evidence on different issues. Common obstacles and constraints are highlighted throughout.

### 6.2 An overview of data collection methods

Evaluating adherence to HPs uses many conventional data collection methods currently associated with humanitarian evaluation.<sup>15</sup> Qualitative data collection methods are particularly important to gather evidence on adherence to HPs, especially interviews with key stakeholders including agency staff, partners and affected people, to understand the extent to which decision-making has been guided by HPs, and to capture the perceptions of different groups of how principled humanitarian action has been. Experienced evaluators of humanitarian action describe the importance of an inductive approach – open-ended and exploratory – to evaluating adherence to HPs.

The sensitivity of issues to be explored requires careful thought, preparation and some adaptation of conventional data collection methods, for example to evaluate decision-making and to create a safe space for interviewees to discuss sensitive topics (see [section 6.4](#) and [example 17](#)).

#### *Constraints*

Where it has been impossible to access certain stakeholders, the evaluation report should state this clearly in its methods section, in terms of limitations and the implications for the findings. For example, it is often difficult for evaluation teams to reach and interview representatives of non-state armed groups (see example 13).

#### **Example 13: ECHO evaluation team explain the constraints in meeting non-state armed groups**

The evaluation team for the ECHO evaluation and review of humanitarian access strategies commented in the final report that:

While it was possible to meet relevant government officials during the country visits, time constraints and other factors made consulting representatives of non-state armed groups impossible. This is an important constraint, considering that areas under the control of armed groups are often inaccessible to humanitarian actors. Approaching armed groups would have required lengthy country visits of several months.

Source: ECHO. 2012. Evaluation and Review of Humanitarian Access Strategies in DG ECHO Funded Interventions. Brussels.

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<sup>15</sup> The 2016 UNEG review found that evaluations of humanitarian action that referred to HPs had used standard methodologies such as surveys, document reviews and interviews, and had not used any specifically designed methodologies. A review of evaluations that refer to HPs since 2016 reveals the same pattern.

**Tip: There tends to be a bias in international aid agencies towards quantitative data collection methods and indicators, and away from qualitative methods and data which can be dismissed as anecdotal. To counteract this, it is important for the evaluation team to develop a robust approach to qualitative data collection methods and analysis, and to describe that approach fully.**

Table 4 provides an overview of some of the most common data collection methods relevant to evaluations of adherence to HPs. These methods are elaborated in the following subsections.

**Table 4: Most common data collection methods**

Principle to be evaluated	Lines of enquiry to build evidence	Data collection methods	Primary (P) or secondary (S) data
Overall adherence to HPs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agency’s commitment to HPs</li> </ul>	Review of policy, strategic planning and operational planning documentation	S
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Knowledge of HPs amongst staff and partners</li> </ul>	Interviews with staff and partners and online surveys	P
		Review of training materials	S
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decision-making processes and extent to which HPs were considered over other considerations/frameworks</li> </ul>	Interviews with decision-makers	P
		Review of documentation: programme strategies, meeting minutes, risk assessments and risk matrices	S
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ongoing analysis and understanding of the political context within senior management</li> </ul>	Review of context analysis documents and situation reports	S
		Interviews with senior decision-makers at headquarters level and in the field	P
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How organizational culture has promoted/constrained adherence to HPs</li> </ul>	Interviews and workshops with staff at headquarters and country level: senior, middle and junior staff (possible case studies)	P
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nature of trade-offs and compromises, and basis on which made e.g. “red lines”, the agency was not prepared to cross</li> </ul>	Interviews with senior decision-makers at headquarters level and in the field (possible case studies)	P
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agency engagement in, influence of UN-wide efforts to promote principled humanitarian action</li> </ul>	Interviews with UN leadership in-country and in other UN agencies	P
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agency communication of its humanitarian identity to key stakeholders</li> </ul>	Review of agency communications with affected people, other stakeholders for example government, non-state actors	S	

Principle to be evaluated	Lines of enquiry to build evidence	Data collection methods	Primary (P) or secondary (S) data
		Interviews with those stakeholders	P
Humanity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nature of relationship between UN agency and affected people (AAP)</li> </ul>	Observation of how agency staff engage with affected people	P
		Interviews with affected people	P
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How effectively the agency has met protection and other humanitarian needs, constraints and how the agency has attempted to overcome them</li> </ul>	Review of programme monitoring data	S
		Interviews with agency staff, partners and affected people	P
Impartiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coverage of needs assessments, geographically and by population group</li> </ul>	Review of quality and coverage of needs assessments	S
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Targeting strategy and approach</li> </ul>	Review of targeting strategy, criteria and application	S
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Whether and how inclusion has been addressed in humanitarian programming</li> </ul>	Interviews with agency staff, partners and affected people about targeting and who has been supported / who has been left out	P
		Review of feedback from the affected population through AAP mechanisms	S
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategies and approaches for negotiating access to those in need who are hard to reach (e.g. behind conflict lines, in remote communities)</li> </ul>	Interviews with senior managers engaged in negotiating access	P
		Interviews with partners	P
		Interviews with those with whom access is being negotiated, e.g. government, non-state actors	P
Neutrality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perception of the UN agency by a range of stakeholders</li> <li>If relevant, consequences of being perceived as not neutral</li> </ul>	Surveys and focus group discussions with affected people and other stakeholders in-country – also interviews	P
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Coverage of the agency's work in national and international media, and on social media</li> </ul>	Media analysis, including social media (e.g. through keyword searches)	S
Independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Perception of the UN agency by a range of stakeholders</li> </ul>	As above	P

Principle to be evaluated	Lines of enquiry to build evidence	Data collection methods	Primary (P) or secondary (S) data
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If relevant, consequences of being perceived as not independent</li> </ul>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UN agency's relationship with government</li> </ul>	Interviews with agency staff, with government officers from national to local levels, and with staff of donor and other humanitarian agencies	P
		Review of agency agreements/memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with government departments	S
		Analysis of data gathered above, e.g. on negotiating access and compromises made	S
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UN agency's funding sources and relationship with funders</li> </ul>	Review of funding strategy, diversity of funding and any evidence of donor influence over programming Interviews with donor agency officials	S P
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Impact on UN agency's humanitarian action of wider political considerations, e.g. if part of an integrated mission, peacebuilding efforts</li> </ul>	Interviews with agency staff, staff of peer UN agencies, donors and agency partners	P

### 6.3 How to evaluate policy on HPs and whether the agency's organizational culture promotes adherence to HPs

In the inception phase, the evaluation team will have reviewed the agency's policies on HPs. This could be taken two steps further in the main phase of the evaluation:

- a) Exploring the extent to which corporate policy has influenced and informed policies and strategies at country level, through a review of relevant documentation and key informant interviews with senior management.
- b) Comparing the agency's policy on HPs with the policies of other UN agencies and international NGOs, to assess how far they go, their clarity, and any examples of good practice from other agencies (this is most appropriate for policy evaluations, and was used in WFP's HP policy evaluation, where UNHCR, UNICEF, Norwegian Refugee Council and the ICRC were selected as the comparators). Apart from depending on a review of documentation, this could be backed by a small number of key informant interviews.

Research on principled pragmatism to secure access in volatile environments has identified organizational practices that facilitate gaining access and delivering high quality humanitarian programming in highly insecure environments (Haver and Carter, 2016). These practices are summarized in Tool 4. This can be used as a checklist by evaluators to answer evaluation questions about how the wider organizational culture may have supported or constrained adherence to HPs. This is relevant to policy evaluations, programme/thematic evaluations and project evaluations as a key factor to determine how the agency has followed HPs for a specific intervention.

**Tool 4: A checklist for evaluating if the agency has an enabling organizational culture for supporting adherence to HPs**

Essential questions

1. To what extent does the organizational culture encourage open discussion of compromises, corruption and ethical risks?
2. How nuanced is the agency’s understanding of HPs and ethical risks, including incorporating these ideas into risk management frameworks and staff trainings? What is the agency’s risk appetite?<sup>16</sup>
3. How clear and available to staff (including national staff) are policy guidance, support and training on negotiations?
4. To what extent does the organizational culture encourage a strong understanding of the context, conflict and power dynamics, for example by mapping out the interests of political actors (such as donors, host governments and armed non-state actors) and examining how they may negatively influence the agency’s ability to be impartial and independent?
5. Does the agency bring donors and other agencies into dilemmas, thus making them a shared problem and encouraging a shared approach to solutions, rather than having one operational agency absorbing all the risk (this could include questioning or clarifying the intent of donors’ counterterrorism and zero-tolerance policies)?

More detailed questions for more in-depth evaluation

1. How are national staff selected and developed in terms of promoting quality programming and integrity? To what extent are they empowered to fill senior positions through regular, sustained support and monitoring to prevent corruption?
2. To what extent does the agency invest time and resources in designing participatory, flexible programmes and effective communication with affected people, including pushing back against regulations and/or not accepting funding from donors that may impede this goal?
3. How far does the agency independently monitor, investigate and tackle the most problematic types of corruption that prevent vulnerable people from receiving aid, and provide incentives for the greater integrity of aid?
4. How does the agency ensure that aid delivery is made as safe as possible for recipients, such as through localized distributions?
5. To what extent does the agency provide greater direct funding to national partners that are able to access hard-to-reach areas, based on realistic assessments of actual fiduciary risks?

Source: Haver, K. and Carter, W. 2016. What it Takes: Principled pragmatism to enable access and quality humanitarian aid in insecure environments. Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) programme. London, Humanitarian Outcomes. 13 & 14.

<sup>16</sup> Note that ethical risks tend not to be part of agencies’ expanding risk management systems, which focus on security, fiduciary, reputational and legal risks (Stoddard *et al.*, 2016a).



## 6.4 How to evaluate staff awareness on HPs

Evidence of staff knowledge and awareness of HPs, how they understand HPs and the extent to which they use HPs, implicitly or explicitly, as a reference point and normative framework, can be built up through a mixture of interviews with staff and an online survey.

Experienced evaluators emphasize the value of giving agency staff space to tell their story of the humanitarian response, and to listen for when and how they refer to HPs, and their understanding of HPs, as the best way to gauge how staff understand HPs, and if/how they apply them. This avoids leading questions, and may also reveal wide differences in how HPs are understood and interpreted in practice, which is in itself a valuable finding. This approach requires the evaluator/interviewer to have a strong understanding of HPs, and ideally knowledge and experience of how they have been applied in different contexts.

**Tip: In using a “storytelling” approach, the role of the evaluator is to prompt, e.g. “and then what happened”, “what did you think”?**

Online surveys are a useful additional data collection method, well-suited to ask straightforward questions such as:

- Staff knowledge of agency policies on HPs
- Whether staff have had training or guidance on how to follow HPs
- Staff awareness of agency policies on HPs

These questions could be incorporated into an online survey for staff that is exploring a wide range of issues including and beyond HPs. For some evaluations it may be possible and appropriate to run an online survey for the UN agency’s partners. In [Example 14](#), an evaluation dedicated to HPs, the online survey was open to staff, cooperating partners and external stakeholders, thus enabling a comparison of different perspectives across the three groups.

### **Example 14: Online survey from WFP’s evaluation of policies on HPs and access in humanitarian contexts**

The online survey was disseminated to WFP staff, cooperating partners and external stakeholders, exploring issues such as:

- How well the respondent, as a WFP staff member, understands HPs – with five options to choose from (answers to this question were disaggregated by seniority of staff: management as P4 and above, and all other staff);
- How well other WFP staff understand HPs, from the respondent’s perspective;
- The most helpful factors for applying HPs – up to three answers from a prepared list; and
- The most helpful factors for understanding how WFP handles access questions – up to three answers from a prepared list.

The survey findings were triangulated against data collected from key informant interviews.

Triangulation between survey results and data collected through key informant interviews is important as survey results tend to reveal a positive bias.<sup>17</sup>

Staff exit surveys are another potentially valuable source of information on staff perspectives, if the agency concerned has regularly asked about HPs and documented this, so it can be drawn upon in the evaluation. This can be particularly useful to capture the perspectives of staff involved in different phases of the response, especially those involved in the first weeks or months of the crisis who may have left by the time an evaluation is carried out (see Example 15, from the ALNAP Evaluation of Humanitarian Action Guide, on how the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [IFRC staff exit surveys captured staff perceptions of adherence to humanitarian principles).

**Example 15: IFRC’s use of exit surveys to capture staff perceptions on humanitarian principles**

IFRC ran staff exit surveys in their large-scale emergency operations including Haiti and the Philippines. In the early weeks of the disaster, staff leaving the operation were asked questions about their perception of how well the IFRC’s fundamental principles were adhered to, or not, and how well IFRC was incorporating the views and opinions of the affected population. Exit surveys were run for several months so they could provide valuable information and insights for the IFRC’s real-time evaluation, capturing insights from staff that had been part of the operation and had left. “It’s useful, it’s anonymous and it’s definitely a practice I found very useful” (Josse Gillijns, personal communication, 2015, as captured in ALNAP, 2016: page 253).

## 6.5 How to evaluate decision-making, trade-offs and leadership

Evidence of the extent to which decision-making has been guided by HPs is at the heart of evaluating against HP. In inter-agency evaluations, the focus is likely to be collective decision-making, for example in Humanitarian Country Team and UN country team meetings. For single agency evaluations the focus is likely to be decision-making by senior management in that agency, at country, regional and possibly headquarters level.

Evaluating decision-making is particularly challenging as some of the most relevant and sensitive decision-making is unlikely to have been documented (although there is a greater likelihood that collective decision-making in HCT and UN Country Team meetings, and in cluster meetings will have been documented, than decision-making within a single agency). For this reason, key informant interviews, especially one-to-one, are likely to be the main data gathering method. As noted above, giving staff – especially senior managers – space to tell their story is key to evaluating decision-making against HPs, and especially to understand trade-offs and compromises made. Evaluators should listen and look for evidence of “red lines” that senior management was not prepared to cross in making decisions, and:

- i. Assess how these “red lines” relate to HPs;

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<sup>17</sup> This was the case in the WFP evaluation on HPs profiled in Example 14. The results of an ECHO evaluation of the implementation of the European consensus on humanitarian aid also revealed survey bias: “EU Member State surveys often presented a more positive picture than interviews with the same Member State agencies during the visits to Member State capitals. Respondents are often representatives of the humanitarian agencies or departments, which may introduce a bias. To overcome this effect, survey results have been cross-checked with interview findings in the analysis presented below” (European Commission, 2014: 18).

- ii. Whether the “red lines” were consistently respected in decision-making, and by whom; and
- iii. The consequences of not crossing the “red lines” for principled humanitarian action.

Example 16 illustrates a “red line” relating to HPs, that was highlighted in the Yemen IAHE.

**Example 16: Red lines relating to HPs highlighted in evaluations**

Yemen IAHE (2022): WFP suspension of food assistance when it had inadequate say in ensuring the most vulnerable received food assistance.

The importance of leadership in mobilizing effective humanitarian action is widely acknowledged (Buchanan-Smith and Scriven, 2011; Niland *et al.*, 2015).

This is particularly important in promoting and standing up for *principled* humanitarian action, and will show up in the types of decisions made, and how these were made.

Interviewing agency staff about decision-making and compromises made requires a particular set of conditions for staff to talk honestly, and at any depth, in particular:

- a. a safe space so that staff are prepared to talk openly;
- b. trust in the evaluator and in how sensitive information will be used.

Examples 17 and 18 illustrate how a safe space can be created for interviewees.

**Example 17: WFP HP evaluation: creating a safe space for interviewees to talk openly and build trust<sup>18</sup>**

Ways of creating a safe space for interviewees to talk openly include:

1. Careful choice of the physical location and time assigned to the interview, to ensure the interviewee feels comfortable, is not concerned about being overheard and is not rushed in the discussion.
2. Designing and clearly explaining measures to ensure confidentiality of information shared by the interviewee.
3. Storing written digital records of interviews securely in encrypted files, to which only three senior evaluators who had been the interviewers, would have access; names of interviewees were stored separately from content.
4. Further reassurance could be provided through a letter from senior management stressing the importance of sharing experiences and reinforcing confidentiality measures.
5. Seeking the informed consent of the interviewee in advance, clarifying that they are not obliged to be interviewed and can opt out of any questions as they choose.

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<sup>18</sup> This box draws on the approach developed for interviews and data collection for the evaluation of WFP’s policies on HPs and access in humanitarian contexts, and on how ethics and confidentiality are described in the final report.

6. Giving the interviewee the chance to ask questions before starting the interview as well as during the interview, for example clarifying the reason for the interview and/or what happens to the data.
7. Being very clear about how the information will be taken and used from the interview process, without attribution to the context being discussed, or to the interviewee.
8. Encouraging the interviewer to bring their own trusted translator, if one is needed.

N.B.: Confidentiality protocols, including the issue of whether interviewees have the option to stay entirely anonymous (i.e. not have their names or positions listed in the list of interviewees) should be clarified with the respective evaluation office during the inception phase.

Additional ways of building trust between interviewer and interviewee include:

- The interviewer demonstrates their understanding of some of the issues to be discussed, and the sensitivities and pressures that the interviewee may have faced, to establish credibility.
- Strong interpersonal and interviewing skills to build rapport.

**Example 18: UNICEF evaluation of the coverage and quality of its humanitarian response in complex humanitarian emergencies: addressing confidentiality**

Sensitivities about certain kinds of information related to HPs (e.g. access negotiations) became apparent during the inception phase. To ensure the evaluation team could still gain access to relevant information, while respecting the requirement in the terms of reference for Country Offices to receive written reports, it was agreed that country case study reports would remain internal, and for published reports the analysis would be decontextualized to avoid the disclosure of sensitive information.

Source: UNICEF. 2019. Evaluation of the coverage and quality of the UNICEF humanitarian response in complex humanitarian emergencies. New York, United States of America.

**Tip: For an inter-agency evaluation, experienced evaluators describe “gathering stories” from a range of key informants in different organizations, and thus enabling a cumulative body of evidence to emerge. At the analysis stage it can be useful to make comparisons between agencies in terms of how they applied HPs and made trade-offs, to get a sense of the scope for principled humanitarian action, although such a comparison is usually inappropriate for the final report and at odds with creating a safe space for key informants.**

[Table 4](#) indicated relevant documentation that evaluation teams should request and review when assessing whether and how decision-making was guided by HPs. Risk assessments may be a particularly useful reference document.

- (i) Were the risks of not being able to provide a principled humanitarian response identified early in the response?
- (ii) What mitigating actions were proposed?
- (iii) Were the mitigating actions followed and appropriate?

### **Respondent validation as a more participatory form of evaluating HPs**

“Member checks”, as a form of respondent validation, is used in qualitative research to help improve the accuracy, credibility, validity and transferability of a study’s findings. This could be used in evaluations of HPs through the following process:

1. **Sharing** the cleaned and organized data with interviewees (identifying factors, including names of people and events should be removed, according to the confidentiality protocols agreed for the evaluation), asking if the data provide the whole story, if there are data to refute the facts, and/or to provide a more in-depth picture.
2. During the evaluative process, sharing the evaluation team’s understanding/interpretation of the data, inviting insight and feedback from interviewees; using their feedback to amend the findings, as appropriate, or to add interpretation to the findings, thus bringing in multiple perspectives.
3. Providing preliminary results or findings prior to the draft report being written, encouraging engagement with the findings, and thus building credibility and transparency into the evaluation process and trust in the evaluation team. This is different to presenting a draft report, which often sends the message that findings are “near” final.

Source: Guba, E.G. and Lincoln, Y.S. 1989. Fourth Generation Evaluation. Sage Publications; Stake, R.E. 2010. Qualitative Research: Studying How Things Work. New York: Guilford; Schwandt, T.A. 2001. Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry. Second Edition. Sage Publications.

## **6.6 How to evaluate negotiated access and HPs**

Humanitarian access is understood as a two-pronged concept, comprising:

1. Humanitarian actors’ ability to reach populations in need; and
2. Affected populations’ access to assistance and services (General Assembly Resolution 46/182).

If and how access was negotiated with the government and non-state actors is a particularly relevant issue for evaluating adherence to HPs, for the following reasons:

1. To know if and how HPs guided the agency(ies) negotiating access.
2. To understand what compromises the agency(ies) may have made (often in terms of independence) to secure access to affected populations, and thus trade-offs between principles.
3. To understand the implications of negotiated access for different groups of affected populations having access to assistance and services, and thus adherence to impartiality and humanity.

**Tip: When evaluating negotiated access, explore what support and guidance frontline humanitarian negotiators have received from their organization.<sup>19</sup>**

**Tip: Pay attention to how partners of UN agencies negotiated access. Negotiating access at local level may have been delegated to implementing partners, even if this is not explicit (in many contexts, national partners have better access than their international counterparts, and a better understanding of the context and need).<sup>20</sup> To what extent have partners been supported by the respective UN agency, have they been encouraged to follow HPs, and are there any references to negotiating access in project documents? (See [section 6.11](#) below).**

#### **Example 19: Evaluating principled access to improve coverage and quality**

Principled access was part of an evaluation question and therefore a key line of enquiry in this UNICEF evaluation. The evaluation took the following approach to answering the question:

1. Exploring UNICEF staff understanding of HPs from senior to field level, listening for evidence of particular HPs being prioritized over others.
2. Conducting a review and analysis of available guidance material for UNICEF staff on decision-making to negotiate access.
3. Drawing on country case study examples of how access was negotiated and whether HPs were a reference point: from a field mission carried out by the evaluation team, and also from country-specific research carried out by other organizations.
4. Investigating the extent to which, and how UNICEF engaged with its partners when they were the ones negotiating access, and any reference to HPs.
5. Exploring and understanding the level of UNICEF's negotiations to secure access, from a higher strategic level with state and non-state armed groups, to local level negotiations, and also how it coordinated/relied upon other UN actors negotiating access on behalf of the UN, e.g. OCHA, the HCT.
6. Identifying a good practice example of a structured approach to engagement and negotiation as a learning opportunity for the agency.

Source: UNICEF. 2019. Evaluation of the coverage and quality of the UNICEF humanitarian response in complex humanitarian emergencies. New York, United States of America.

In highly contested and challenging conflict environments, it may be judged that it is neither appropriate nor feasible for an evaluation to explore negotiations over access. Instead, peer learning and reflection, for example through the Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation, may be more appropriate. Key reference 7 provides a list of key resources for evaluators to consult if negotiated access is to be evaluated.

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<sup>19</sup> Research shows that frontline humanitarian negotiators often receive limited guidance in the planning of negotiation processes, the design of humanitarian arrangements, and the evaluation of cost and benefit of tactical options (CCHN, 2016: 3).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the findings of the UNICEF 2019 evaluation on the coverage and quality of its humanitarian response in complex humanitarian emergencies.

### Key reference 7: Key resources when evaluating negotiated access

- Harmer, A. and Fox. 2018. Research on Good Practices on Humanitarian Access.
- UNICEF. 2021. Humanitarian Access Field Manual.
- Haver, K. and Carter, W. 2016. What it Takes: Principled pragmatism to enable access and quality humanitarian aid in insecure environments. Secure Access in Volatile Environments (SAVE) programme. London, Humanitarian Outcomes.
- OCHA. 2016. Oxford Guidance on the Law Relating to Humanitarian Relief Operations in Situations of Armed Conflict, commissioned by OCHA.  
<https://docs.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/Oxford%20Guidance%20pdf.pdf>
- Jackson. 2014. ODI/ HPG research findings on negotiating with armed non-state actors, which could be used as a checklist in evaluations.
- Grace. n.d. Humanitarian Negotiation: Key Challenges and Lessons Learned in an Emerging Field, ATHA White Paper Series. ATHA, Humanitarian Academy at Harvard, SIDA.
- Frontline Negotiations. 2024. Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiations  
<https://frontline-negotiations.org/>

## 6.7 How to evaluate against the HP of humanity

The principle of humanity is defined at a high level of abstraction (Fast, 2016). Evaluating adherence to humanity requires making an evaluative judgement of the extent to which humanitarian, including protection needs have/are being met. The first step is evaluating how well the needs of the affected people are understood by the respective agency(ies). In practice, the principle of humanity is often linked to the principle of impartiality, ensuring non-discrimination in how humanitarian assistance is provided.<sup>21</sup>

The extent to which a humanitarian response respects and promotes the dignity of those affected is another dimension of humanity, which can be evaluated by paying attention to the nature of the relationship between the respective agency(ies) and affected people (see [section 6.12](#) below). Evaluation of the accountability to affected peoples component of a humanitarian response is highly relevant (see example 20 from the Yemen IAHE on evaluation of humanity).

### Example 20: Evaluating humanity

In evaluating against the principle of humanity, the Yemen IAHE paid attention to the following:

- How well needs were understood and met: in particular evidence that some needs had been deprioritized (e.g. protection), and the needs of some population groups were poorly met.
- The choice of modality of aid delivery, and how that impacted the dignity of affected people.

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<sup>21</sup> Non-discrimination draws on the principle of humanity's fundamental recognition that all people are created equal and so must be treated equally (personal communication, Marc DuBois).

- The nature of the relationship between humanitarian agencies and the affected population, including the consequences of “bunkerization” of the UN and other factors that affected engagement between aid agencies and affected people.

Source: IAHE. 2022. Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) of the Yemen Crisis. Geneva, Switzerland.  
<https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluation-iahe-yemen-crisis>

## 6.8 How to evaluate against the HP of impartiality

Evaluating adherence to the principle of impartiality means paying attention to who is receiving humanitarian assistance (in turn linked to negotiating access, above), targeting and evidence of inclusion (see [Table 4](#) above). Paying attention to inclusion in terms of sex, age and disability is a common practice in humanitarian evaluation. Evaluators should explore other potential determinants of vulnerability and discrimination that may be context-specific, for example ethnicity, geographic location and remoteness, and gender identity.

A useful set of benchmarks for evaluating impartiality, particularly at the organizational level, is provided by the Standing Committee on Humanitarian Response (SCHR, 2014). See key reference 8, which also summarizes the implications of the findings of the 2014 review of SCHR members, for evaluation.

### Key reference 8: Example of benchmarks to assess impartiality

**Benchmark:** The organization has a clear publicly communicated policy statement regarding respect for and promotion of impartiality of humanitarian assistance

This is the starting point but is not a guarantee of good practice on impartiality. Explore whether staff are aware of the policy and if it is being implemented.

**Benchmark:** The principle of impartiality is incorporated into policies and procedures and communicated to and understood by staff

Look for evidence that staff have a shared understanding of what impartiality means, beyond non-discrimination to also include the notion of proportionality (i.e. that humanitarian assistance is provided according to need).

**Benchmark:** The principle of impartiality is incorporated into fundraising and resource mobilization strategies of the organization

Be aware that the principle of impartiality can be undermined when non-earmarked funding is limited and when the organization is limited in the reserves it can put aside, especially if donor funding is focused on certain countries over others.

**Benchmark:** Impartiality guides global resource allocations within the organization

Explore whether the organization has mechanisms to move funds from one situation to another to ensure that the response to one emergency is not happening at the expense of other emergencies.

[These four areas are supported by a set of sub-indicators which are not included here but would be useful for evaluating adherence to impartiality]

Source: SCHR. 2014. SCHR Impartiality Review: Report of Findings. Geneva.



## 6.9 How to evaluate independence in terms of the UN agency's relationship with government

As described in [section 3.1](#), UN agencies face a particular challenge in adhering to the HP of independence in contexts where they work closely with government, yet government may be party to the conflict that has triggered the humanitarian crisis, and/or controls how the respective UN agency is providing humanitarian assistance. This is a key issue for evaluation against HPs.

Ways of exploring this include the following:

1. Contextual understanding of government involvement in/“ownership” of the response and its implications for humanitarian space and for UN agencies following the principle of independence.<sup>22</sup>
2. Understanding the scope and range of agreements and relationships the UN agency has with the respective national government and tensions between them, e.g. are there close relationships with the government around development priorities that have taken precedence over striving for the independence of humanitarian action?
3. Reviewing how coordination of humanitarian action is organized, in terms of maintaining independence, especially for IAHEs.<sup>23</sup>
4. Reviewing partnership documents and memorandums of understanding (MOUs) that the respective UN agency has with line ministries and departments in government, and the implications for the UN agency's independence of humanitarian action.
5. Evaluating how access has been negotiated with the government and compromises made.
6. Exploring how the relationship is perceived by staff of the agency(ies) being evaluated, government officials, and by other humanitarian actors.
7. Capturing and analysing the consequences of agreements made with government, for example in terms of the independence of needs assessments, how an Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis has been carried out, UN agency access to different geographical areas and different groups.

Key informant interviews, plus some documentation review, are likely to be the main way of collecting data on this issue. For more information, see example 21.

### **Example 21: Evaluation of UNHCR response to the L3 Emergency in Afghanistan 2021–2022**

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, the 2019 IAHE of the drought response in Ethiopia 2015–2018 (IAHE, 2019) which describes how the “government-led response model... created tensions between the humanitarian principle of independence and national ownership in Ethiopia” (IAHE, 2019: 67). See, also, the 2019 evaluation of UN Women's Contribution to Humanitarian Action, Finding 11 questions the appropriateness of UN Women's “choice” to partner with government, for example in training police officers, in certain contexts (UN Women, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> The Yemen IAHE provided evidence of how coordination mechanisms and the location of coordination meetings were compromised in terms of independence (IAHE, 2022)

The evaluation explored UNHCR’s relationship with the de facto authorities (DfA), through the lens of independence (and also neutrality) through the following:

- The findings of the recent peer-to-peer (P2P) review report as an overview of the challenges to HPs in Afghanistan.
- UNHCR’s internal risk documents as evidence of the extent to which UNHCR management was aware of, and had considered and prepared for the potential risk of interference by the DfA.
- How UNHCR’s planned partnership agreement with the DfA was perceived, in terms of putting to a test its independence, versus enabling UNHCR to have unrestricted access and to fulfil its protection and other roles (the partnership agreement was being discussed at the time of the evaluation and the evaluation team did not have sight of it).
- How coherent and consistent HCT-level decision-making had been in terms of engaging with the DfA, and how UNHCR had positioned itself in relation to other HCT actors.
- At subnational level, exploring DfA attempts at interference in needs assessments, beneficiary selection and distribution processes.

While the final evaluation report commented on aspects of UNHCR’s relationship with the DfA and the consequences, particularly at subnational level, it also “sought not to be evaluative regarding UNHCR engagement with the DfA, because of the early development of these partnerships as well as the sensitivities around this topic”.

Source: UNHCR. 2023. Evaluation of UNHCR’s Response to the L3 Emergency in Afghanistan 2021–2022. Geneva, Switzerland <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/evaluation-report-l3-emergency-afghanistan-june-2023.pdf>

## 6.10 How to evaluate independence in terms of the UN agency’s relationship with donors

A UN agency’s relationships with donors are often determined by funding. This can compromise independence if funds are provided by belligerent states, and/or by states that support one of the opposing sides in the conflict, have commercial interests or seek influence in the area (ACF, 2013). This is usually termed instrumentalization of humanitarian aid.

This can be a particularly sensitive issue to evaluate when the final evaluation report will be in the public domain, and in a challenging environment for fundraising where available humanitarian funding is falling far short of UN humanitarian appeals. The respective UN agency(ies) may be concerned about the consequences of negative findings on its relationship with key donors. These sensitivities explain why there is a dearth of humanitarian evaluations that have looked at UN agency independence from donor governments, even when this is known to be an issue. It is more likely to have been raised in research reports (see, for example, Danish Refugee Council, 2023; Montemurro & Wendt, 2021).

Issues for evaluators to consider include the following:

1. Drawing on and referencing the findings of research reports that may have explored the pattern of donor funding and policies in a particular humanitarian crisis, and the implications for HPs, particularly independence.

2. The extent to which the agency’s funding strategies have taken HPs into account, and analysis of criteria (if any) to guide funding decisions, including evidence of red lines related to HPs that could result in funding being turned down.
3. Evidence of discussions between UN agencies and donors about principled humanitarian action, e.g. in relation to the implications of donor compliance; about how donor advocacy with belligerents could support principled humanitarian action.
4. Exploring the impact of donors’ counter terrorism policies on principled humanitarian action, for example working with service providers which may be associated with designated terrorist organizations (see example 22).

**Example 22: Paying attention to the impact of donor governments’ counterterrorism legislation**

This evaluation explored the extent to which counterterrorism measures, applied by some donor governments, affected two interlinked issues, both pertinent to HPs:

1. Targeting of, and therefore access to specific areas under the control of parties to a conflict, if they/their leaders are designated as global terrorists; and
2. In the case of (1), the implications for community perceptions of humanitarian bias and partiality, which in turn could negatively affect access and safety.

Source: UNICEF. 2019. Evaluation of the coverage and quality of the UNICEF humanitarian response in complex humanitarian emergencies. New York, United States of America.

## 6.11 How to evaluate partnerships from the perspective of HPs

The nature of a UN agency’s partnerships can be a significant factor determining principled humanitarian action, particularly its operational/implementing partnerships, but also its strategic and inter-agency partnerships.

In terms of strategic partnerships, evaluators should explore the extent to which a collective approach is being adopted to the operationalization and application of HPs, and the role of the UN agency being evaluated, noting that a collective approach is usually more effective (see [section 3.1](#) above, and also the Yemen IAHE [2022]).

For implementing partnerships, especially with national NGOs, there are three key issues evaluators should pay attention to:

1. Mapping the decision-making and actions that have been handed over or delegated to the implementing partner by the respective UN agency that have implications for a principled humanitarian response (e.g. needs assessments and targeting, negotiating access at the local level), and the extent to which this is a clear and supported delegation versus a “convenient” and less supported transfer of risk and difficult decision-making.

**Tip: Where negotiating local access has been delegated to national partners, check if the UN agency concerned has a clear understanding of how national partners gain and maintain access, and whether HPs are adhered to.**<sup>24</sup>

2. How the respective UN agency has supported its implementing partners to provide principled humanitarian action, for example through training and capacity development, and/or the extent to which international NGO partners have supported national partners.<sup>25</sup> Are HPs referenced in UN agency contracts and letters of agreement? Are partners encouraged to discuss and raise challenges and problems encountered during implementation, that may threaten or compromise HPs? What level of trust exists between the UN agency and national partner?
3. The extent to which a UN agency's portfolio of national implementing partners reflects principled humanitarian action. As mentioned above, HPs are not accepted or adopted by all humanitarian actors. Some align more with concepts of humanitarian resistance, or solidarity, yet may still be valued and important partners to a UN agency that is striving to reach particular population groups. In this case, evaluating the portfolio of partners against HPs is important, in particular the extent to which it enables an impartial response to be implemented, based on need, and that is neutral. For example, in a conflict-related humanitarian crisis, does the portfolio of partners enable a needs-based humanitarian response that reaches affected people across conflict lines, e.g. in different geographic areas that may be controlled by different groups in the conflict?

**Tip: When evaluating the portfolio of national implementing partners, pay attention to how well the respective UN agency knows its implementing partners and their values as well as which groups they serve/have access to.**

KIIs with implementing partners are likely to be the main means of collecting data on these issues. Creating a safe space and building trust, e.g. around anonymity of what they share, are key for implementing partners to openly share their experiences, and how they negotiated access. Where an online survey of partners is part of the evaluation's overall data collection methods, a couple of questions on HPs could be inserted, e.g. about awareness, whether received training.

## 6.12 How to consult with the affected population on HPs

Consulting with affected populations should be central to evaluations against HPs, and is closely related to evaluating agencies' performance in providing accountability to affected people. Key issues to be explored through consultation with affected people include:

1. Evaluating the humanity of the respective UN agency's humanitarian programming, in terms of how the agency and its partners have engaged with affected people, in a respectful and dignified fashion. Affected people themselves are the best judge of this, although it is a challenging issue to explore, that may require indirect lines of questioning and discussion. Local sociologists and anthropologists may be best-placed

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<sup>24</sup> One evaluator interviewed for this guide talked about the "conspiracy of silence", for example when UN agencies hand over responsibility for negotiating access and ask no questions.

<sup>25</sup> Research findings have shown that international agencies that invest in the quality of their partnerships with national organizations have greater opportunities to gain access (Haver and Carter, 2016).

to do this ([example 23](#) demonstrates how this was done afterwards for the humanitarian response to Typhoon Haiyan).

2. Evaluating whether humanitarian action has been impartial and needs-based. This means disaggregating the affected population according to their different experiences of the crisis, and therefore their different needs, to consult with them about how those needs have been met, e.g. by sex, age, rural versus urban, different livelihood groups, different ethnic groups. This is already a conventional part of many evaluations of humanitarian action, related to the OECD/DAC criterion of coverage, so there is much experience to draw upon on how to do this.

**Tip: Experienced evaluators and researchers have found the concept of “fairness” to be a useful way to deepen discussions with affected people about who is receiving assistance, who is not, and whether that is “fair”, i.e. according to need, for example in focus group discussions and in surveys of affected communities (see [example 24](#)).**

3. Capturing the views and perceptions of people affected by the crisis about the neutrality and independence of the respective UN agency’s humanitarian action. This needs to be planned carefully, to choose and test appropriate language and interview questions, especially in focus group discussions (see [example 24](#)). However, it may also be possible to include a simple question or two in a quantitative survey as demonstrated in Example 25.

#### **Example 23: Local sociologist researchers consult affected people after Typhoon Haiyan**

As part of the Pamati Kita project, implemented jointly by Plan International, World Vision International and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a case study was carried out to explore how affected people had experienced humanitarian agencies’ efforts to be accountable to them, comparing their perspectives with the perspectives of the agencies themselves. Three experienced Filipino sociology researchers, familiar with the local language and customs, and with prior research experience of ethnographic fieldwork with Typhoon Haiyan-affected communities consulted affected people. The team introduced themselves as academics independent from humanitarian agencies to encourage as unbiased a response as possible. The findings were insightful, and interpreted by the team of researchers against cultural norms. For example, the conventional practice of targeting assistance according to individual needs, employed by humanitarian agencies, was revealed to be at odds with the cultural context, and caused real social division.

Source: Buchanan-Smith, M., Ong, J., Flores, J.M. and Combinido, P. 2015 Obligated to be Grateful. How local communities experienced humanitarian actors in the Haiyan response. Plan International, World Vision, IOM and UKAID.

#### **Example 24: Survey of affected people in WFP peacebuilding evaluation**

Local research organizations were commissioned to carry out quantitative surveys amongst affected communities in a number of case study countries. Questions asked, that relate to HPs, include:

- In your opinion, was WFP assistance provided in a fair way in this community?  
(*impartiality*)

- Is there anyone who should have received assistance in your community but was left out? (*impartiality*)
- Who received the most assistance in your community? (*impartiality*)
- Does WFP help one side to win in any ongoing armed conflict here? (*neutrality*)
- Is WFP against anyone? (*neutrality*)

Source: WFP. 2023. Evaluation of the Policy on WFP's Role in Peacebuilding in Transition Settings. Rome.

Approaches, methods and ethical issues in consulting affected people are well-covered in section 14 of the ALNAP Evaluation of Humanitarian Action Guide. The two main methods for consulting affected people and capturing their perceptions are:

1. Through qualitative data collection methods such as focus group discussions and group interviews. These are usually more effective in exploring affected people's experiences and perspectives, especially in conflict environments where there may be high levels of suspicion and distrust. Carefully selecting local evaluators and researchers to carry out focus group discussions and group interviews is key to ensure they have the necessary skills, will be "accepted" by the people to be interviewed and can effectively build rapport.
2. Through quantitative surveys, that may be carried out by local research/data collection organizations and sometimes by polling companies or where a couple of questions are added to ongoing monitoring surveys. These are increasingly used for this purpose, and can reach large numbers of people. Some quantitative surveys are done through telephone and SMS surveys, but whether this is an appropriate method depends on cell phone ownership and coverage,<sup>26</sup> and whether local people are likely to respond openly and honestly through such means of communication.<sup>27</sup> A common question that has been asked in surveys of affected people, as part of the enquiry about HPs, is the question about whether some groups have benefited more than others.<sup>28</sup>

Using both methods enables triangulation, as well as more in-depth exploration in qualitative focus group discussions. Ensuring "safe spaces" for affected people to be interviewed, so that they feel comfortable to speak openly and honestly, is key.

Examples [25](#) and [26](#) describe how two research studies explored local people's perceptions of humanitarian assistance, including in relation to HPs. The Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) research study explored local perceptions of the agency, interpreting HPs for different cultural contexts.<sup>29</sup> The Iraq study researched perceptions of humanitarian action among Iraqis at the community level, as well

<sup>26</sup> For example, cellphone ownership is often higher among men than women, and among the better-off.

<sup>27</sup> As used for ALNAP's State of the Humanitarian System report.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, the field survey questionnaire used by the IASC South-Central Somalia evaluation (Polastro *et al.*, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> For example, in Kenya, a neutral organization was described as "one in the middle," "that is central, neither cold nor hot," and one that "stands without following others." Neutrality was also directly linked to the presence of foreigners in the field: "a neutral organization is one that has no brokers. MSF has no middlemen, the whites bring the services to us" (Abu-Sada, 2012: 29).

as among humanitarian actors in the region.<sup>30</sup> The methodologies of both studies could be adapted and applied to an evaluation on a smaller scale.

#### **Example 25: Research studies on local perceptions of humanitarian assistance**

MSF's research into how people in crises perceive humanitarian aid – methodology used

- A preliminary literature review of the context where perceptions were to be explored was carried out to gain an understanding of the environment, for example the history of humanitarian action in the country, and analysis of tensions with the population and/or local authorities.
- A questionnaire was prepared, which included questions about how MSF was perceived, and how the principles upheld by the organization were understood.
- The work was done in collaboration with local universities, involving students of sociology, anthropology and political science.
- The students led discussion groups with a range of stakeholders, including people affected by the crisis, based on the questionnaire. The groups consisted of 10 to 15 people, with separate groups for people living near MSF facilities and people not necessarily in daily contact with the MSF, disaggregated by sex, age and role in the population.
- A scientific committee was set up to monitor the project, providing advice on how to adapt and refocus the research according to feedback from the preliminary field visits. For example, the approach shifted from being semi-quantitative to much more qualitative, using discussion groups to explore the perceptions of people questioned in greater depth.

Source: Abu-Sada. 2012 *In the Eyes of Others: How People in Crises Perceive Humanitarian Aid*. New York, United States of America, NYU Center on International Cooperation, Humanitarian Outcomes, MSF.

#### **Example 26: Tufts/Feinstein International Center's research study of local perceptions of humanitarian action in Iraq**

- A team of three Iraqi researchers (unnamed in the report due to safety concerns), led by an international researcher, carried out 165 semi-structured conversations and interviews at community level.
- Interviews were carried out with Iraqis from different social strata, different ethnic and religious backgrounds, different geographical areas.
- Apart from one focus group, all interviews were conducted confidentially and in private settings.
- When the field-based research inside Iraq ended, the research team gathered in Amman for several days of oral analysis.

Source: Hansen, G. 2007. *Taking Sides or Saving Lives: Existential Choices for the Humanitarian Enterprise in Iraq*. Humanitarian Agenda 2015. Iraq Country Study. Medford, United States of America, Tufts University, Feinstein International Center.

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<sup>30</sup> In the Iraq study: “Many of the Iraqis with whom we spoke equated specific humanitarian principles with Qu’ranic verses about ‘good charity’” (Hansen, 2007: 2004).

Reviewing how the respective UN agency and its partners communicated with affected people on an ongoing basis is also key to evaluating adherence to HPs. There are two strands to this:

- To what extent did the agency promote its humanitarian identity with affected communities, in terms of explaining HPs, what this means in practice and why?
- To what extent did affected communities hear and understand the agency's communications about principled humanitarian action?

Another potential source of data and information are the feedback channels and mechanisms the agency may have put in place to fulfil its commitment to be “accountable to affected people”. Reviewing feedback data, whether gathered through more formal complaints mechanisms such as hotlines and complaints boxes, or more informally (which is usually more insightful) as heard by the agency's frontline staff and partners, will provide insights about the main concerns of affected people. This may give some indication of how they perceive the respective UN agency in terms of responding impartially according to need, and neutrally and independently.

### 6.13 How to facilitate learning processes

For evaluations that integrate HPs and are strongly learning-oriented, the evaluation team can set up and facilitate learning processes with staff and partners as part of the evaluation. This is an opportunity for more participatory and collective discussion of working on HPs. Separate learning processes could be set up for agency staff in-country, staff at headquarters level or in Regional Offices, and/or with implementing partners.

In a context where staff are prepared to discuss and talk openly about the relevance of HPs, and how/whether they have followed HPs, the evaluation team could facilitate an after-action review (AAR) with programme staff to reflect on what happened, why it happened, and learning from the experience. See Tool 5 for a description of how an AAR could be adapted to review the application of HPs.

#### **Tool 5: After-action review adapted for learning about adherence to HPs**

The AAR questions can be adapted as follows:

- How, if at all, have HPs underpinned humanitarian programming\*?
- What factors facilitated adherence to HPs, internal and external?
- What factors constrained adherence to HPs, internal and external?
- What is the learning for the agency from this experience?

\*N.B.: Humanitarian programming to be defined for this exercise, in terms of what aspects of the programme, and over what time period.

As noted in the ALNAP Evaluation of Humanitarian Action Guide (pp.258): “An open atmosphere that fosters trust among participants is essential for a successful AAR. The general principle is ‘no attribution, no retribution’. A neutral and objective facilitator is essential to ensure that the discussion stays focused on issues, remains positive, and does not deteriorate into self-justification or blame”.



## 7. From recommendations on HPs to dissemination for uptake

### 7.1 How to make recommendations on HPs

Where the evaluation finds that consideration of, and adherence to HPs has been weak, this should be reflected in the conclusions and carried through to the recommendations. Recommendations relating to HPs are most likely to be at a strategic level, reflecting that this is the fundamental normative framework underpinning humanitarian action (see [example 27](#) for examples of recommendations related to HPs from a range of evaluations).

#### **Example 27: Examples of recommendations on HPs**

From WFP Evaluation of Nigeria Country Strategic Plan 2019–2022

*Main recommendation:* Develop a clear plan aimed at promoting full adherence to humanitarian norms and principles.

With the following subpoints:

- Outline in concrete terms how the underlying humanitarian principles will be supported, including through the following actions:
  - Explore the possibility of including reference to the humanitarian principles in agreements with the government and partners.
  - Deliver regular and specific training to WFP Country Office staff, especially as part of the induction process for new staff.
  - In collaboration with other UN and humanitarian entities, continue direct engagement with the government to advocate and contribute to the negotiation of humanitarian access and conflict-sensitive food security and livelihood programmes that assist social cohesion.

*From ECHO evaluation* (European Commission, 2014: 96)

*Institutional recommendation, linked to evaluation findings*

Rationale for the recommendation: The evaluation demonstrated differing levels of distinct and independent humanitarian action among the MS and EC Institutions. This was associated with factors including structural independence, clear policy frameworks and appropriate procedures. It was widely noted that the Directorate-General ECHO acted as the foremost “guardian” of humanitarian principles owing to its clear independent structure and procedures. This has allowed DG ECHO to consistently advocate for a principled approach to humanitarian action, that is aligned with the commitments of the European Consensus.

Suggested actions: The Commission should continue to recognize the importance and value of an independent Humanitarian Directorate and Humanitarian Commissioner. Maintaining this degree of independence is viewed as critical in driving forward the Humanitarian Consensus. Any potential reorganization of responsibilities of EU Directorates should not undermine this independence.

*From Yemen IAHE (2022: 125)*

*Practical and strategic recommendation for a particular context*

Enhance and amplify concerted advocacy (and pursue creative solutions) with all authorities to ensure unhindered, principled delivery of aid, building on existing benchmark processes. Ensure collective solidarity by humanitarian leadership on issues requiring common approaches.

## **7.2 How to promote uptake of recommendations on HPs**

The communication strategy for an evaluation against HPs should have been decided during the planning phase, as described in [section 4.9](#) and according to the anticipated sensitivity of the findings. How the findings and recommendations are disseminated will therefore depend upon whether they are in the public domain or not. Where they are not in the public domain, evaluation units should pay special attention to ensuring that they are discussed and followed up through appropriate internal meetings and channels, to promote uptake and guard against a confidential document being “lost”, especially where findings may be challenging.

Ways of promoting uptake and utilization include:

- Ongoing briefing of senior managers within the UN agency with a stake in the humanitarian action that has been evaluated, throughout the evaluation process, so they are encouraged to be part of the reflective evaluative process;
- Presenting the findings and conclusions of the evaluation to senior management, inviting them to be part of the process that identifies the recommendations; and
- Facilitated workshops to review and discuss findings and recommendations.

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